

DARK HEART SERIES COMPLETE COLLECTION

# DARK HEART

SHAYNE FORD

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THE DARK HEART SERIES COMPLETE  
COLLECTION

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**JADEN**

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DARK HEART SERIES BOOK ONE



# S ENNA

“ENJOY YOUR EVENING, MS. LLOYD.”

Stretching a perfect smile, the hotel clerk hands me the key card.

“I hope you’ll find your stay as pleasant as ever,” he says.

For a moment, I study him suspiciously. The man looks at me, a grin beaming in his eyes.

I detect nothing.

Chill, Senna, for fuck’s sake.

“I will,” I say dryly, snatching up the key card and pulling away from the reception desk.

Pacing myself, I stroll across the lobby, my four-inch heels click-clacking against the polished floors all the way to the elevator.

The doors pull open with a quiet hiss.

I step in and press the floor number. As the doors slide shut, I examine my reflection in the wall mirror.

“Not bad,” I murmur to myself, running my eyes down, and checking my body.

The tailored black dress sets off my hourglass silhouette, the push-up bra exposing my cleavage. A black wool jacket

drapes over my shoulders, adding a touch of subtle elegance.

I should dress like this more often.

A mischievous smile glints in my eyes, a chuckle falling from my lips.

I cut my eyes up and inspect the ceiling.

I can't believe I'm giggling by myself. I bet security cameras are hidden beneath the panels, and I'm here laughing and talking to myself.

Looking like an idiot.

Dressed like a femme fatale, snickering like a girl.

Now that's a catchy headline for my website.

I look up again. I bet some nerd just choked on his peanut butter sandwich, ogling me on the live feed. Lowering my eyes, I try to keep my mug under control.

What is wrong with me?

To distract myself, I go back to studying my reflection.

A long curtain of shiny, chocolate hair frames my oval face, setting off my full lips and whiskey-colored eyes.

'A face made for sin,' my grandma used to say, way before I had the slightest idea what she meant by that. I hadn't even been kissed when she uttered that pearl of wisdom.

Frances Lloyd was a smart woman, way ahead of her time. She knew what was lying dormant in me despite me being only a kid at the time. She saw it before anyone else could, and she sure had known it before I did.

Ironically, she ended up being blamed by my family for my wrongdoings. Not that she gave a flying crap. Besides, no one dared to say it to her face.

Frances Lloyd was a tough cookie, and they knew better than to question or argue with her.

In that regard, the woman deserved some credit.

It took her a lot of guts to live the way she did when not many people, especially women, had that kind of courage.

A nostalgic smile curls my lips.

She knew a thing or two about faces made for sin. She had one herself and used it to find lovers and husbands.

She cherry-picked her men, never cheated on them, and never stuck around much when things didn't work out.

She was the kind of woman who never settled or compromised.

As much as she could, that's what she taught me as well.

She got married three times. To her, a man had to be a man, or else.

'There aren't that many good men, sweetie,' she used to say. 'You either learn how to pick them, or you don't, and you end up with an insecure, wishy-washy, wilted flower. Don't wait for them to slobber over you, 'cause real men never do. And never fall for their pocketbooks, either. 'Cause it's not worth it in the end. Make your own damn money. There's no such a thing as being taken care of. Their money comes with interest you have to pay your entire life.'

Yeah... She taught me well.

'And one more thing, my dear...' she said to me one week shy of my seventeen birthday as we were lounging in her backyard, sipping lemonade. 'Don't cut him slack when it comes to the bedroom either. He has one tool to work with, and it's not so damn hard to learn how to use it. Make sure you don't compromise on that one either.'

What can I say?

She was quite the pioneer. Not many people would agree with her, not even in today's world, let alone decades ago.

'We are very much alike, Senna,' Frances used to say, but I was too young to understand what she meant by that.

But now I know.

Carol, her third husband, and my grandpa, the man I owe my looks to, was a man of her taste. The kind you'd go to the

end of the world for. And she did, without having the slightest regret.

Hot-blooded, wild, and stubborn— impossible to tame— he loved Frances and was loyal to her.

Their life together was great as long as it lasted.

Frances and Carol Lloyd were different than other grandparents, and I was lucky to be their favorite granddaughter.

I'd run to them whenever I could get away from school and my parents. Summer or winter, it didn't matter. I loved the time spent with them all the same.

Tilting my head back, I narrow my eyes and shift my focus back to the mirror.

The makeup looks flawless, a plus considering I rarely go out and rarely have the patience to paint my entire face.

The black eyeliner adds depth to my eyes, and the nude lipstick and gloss make my pout stand out.

A smirk crawls up my face.

I stray so far from the flock that even my looks disagree with the long line of blue-eyed, blonde-haired women in my family.

I look nothing like my sisters, Evelyne and Isabel, my mom, or anyone else on her side of the family.

I shift the small voyage bag from one hand to the other and glance at the expensive, designer watch.

It's ten past nine.

I'm late. Good.

The elevator doors glide open with a soft whisper. A large hallway decorated with abstract art, monochromatic rugs, and futuristic furniture comes into view.

I strut down the corridor and make a smooth stop in front of the last door. I swipe my key card and push in.

The room is dark, with only a faint light sneaking through the velvet curtains, not enough to illuminate the place.

I step in, blinking while trying to adjust my eyes when the hard frame of a man stops me a few feet away from the door.

There's not enough time to react before he cuffs my wrist and spins me around to face the wall. My bag drops from the other hand as he twists my arm and presses it against my back.

He grabs both wrists, wraps them in his fist, and pulls them up above my head.

My jacket slides off my shoulders.

Jerking back as hard as I can, I smack him in his chest.

“Don't move,” he growls, pressing my face against the wall.

His thick, low voice courses through me, followed by an instant shudder.

A scent of fresh paint lifts off the wall. It fills my nostrils and brings bile to my mouth. As if it's not bad enough, strands of hair get stuck to my lip gloss, tickling my nose.

I try to blow them away without success.

He winds his arm around my chest and clamps his hand over my mouth, his fingers smearing my lipstick. More hair slips into my mouth.

Fuck.

His fresh scent obliterates the smell of paint, and all I feel right now is the heat coming from his body and the distinct aroma of his aftershave.

He lets go of my wrists, locks one arm around my waist, and slides the other over my chest, his forearm resting between my breasts.

His callous thumb rubs across my lips, the scent of his cologne exploding in my mouth. I writhe against him, my back hitting his chest a few times.

Laughing quietly, he hardens his grip, thick ropes of muscles wrapping around my neck.

I get warm and wet between my legs.

“Keep your hands on the wall,” he barks in a guttural voice.

I listen, doing exactly what I’m told.

His body presses against mine, his bulge rubbing against my lower back.

He lowers his head, his hot breath fanning over my neck.

Slowly, his lips graze my jawline, his hands moving over my body, rough, without much finesse.

Covering my breasts with his hands, he squeezes and kneads them harshly before pinching the puckered nipples.

Sparks fly between my legs.

Rushed, he slips his hands inside my cleavage, yanks the fabric to the sides, and in one sharp motion, tears my dress open.

A tremor sweeps through my body.

Tense, I grunt.

“Chill, baby. Chill. We’ll get to that...” he says. “You’re fucking late,” he groans in my ear.

My curse gets lost in the thickness of his palm.

“This is not the time to talk, babe,” he murmurs, wedging his knee between my legs.

His hand slides up, parting my thighs.

Cold fingers pull the panties to the side, touching my warm flesh. The addictive pleasure soars quickly while his fingers press and rub.

He keeps trailing my slit from behind, stroking the flesh between my folds while using his thumb to probe my entrance before easily sliding it between my warm walls.

A grunt falls to my ears as he starts grinding against me.

Pushing back a moan, I try to pivot so I can face him.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he growls in my ear, shifting his position and tightening his arm around my waist, roughly grabbing my mound while forcing me to arch my body.

He pushes his hard meat harder against me, rubbing it against my body.

Teasing me.

I whip my head to the side.

“Is this better...?” he asks.

No word falls from my lips.

“I guess it is...” he says to himself, his voice hoarse and deep.

He keeps grinding into me.

The more he moves, the more he fuels my pleasure and the need to have him buried deep between my legs.

He grabs the back of my dress and rips it off completely.

I start to swivel to him.

“Don’t move!” he barks, and I freeze. “Open your legs,” he demands.

I spread my legs, struggling to keep my balance on my heels.

The air licks my heated skin before a cold, metallic blade slides over my inner thigh.

My pulse spikes, and my skin is dotted with goosebumps.

Hot and throbbing, I’m grappling with the need to close my legs.

The blade rolls over the swell of my butt and slips under my panties. Holding my panties away from my crotch, he presses the cold, metal edge against my flesh. The throbbing quickens, my chest rising and falling rapidly.

I turn to stone and close my eyes, relishing the tingles swirling in my core. Feeding on that sensation, I begin to forget before reliving everything.

He breathes heavily behind my back.

He's almost there, edging, and for a moment, I have the perfect picture of his hard, wet, glistening cock, dripping with pre-cum, and the image of him eager to enter me and hammer me until releasing the tension built inside him.

The pleasure snowballs through me, and I'm right there with him, seconds away from coming.

He knows it.

He senses it.

This ancient wisdom hasn't changed since the first male crashed into a female.

"Still, baby. Stay still..." he murmurs, his voice lined with heavy lust.

The panties stretch some more before he rips them off.

A cold metallic sound reverberates around the room as the blade hits the floor. He grabs my mound again, his rough fingers pinching my clit.

"You better enter me now," I demand.

He laughs at my request.

"Nah."

My curse fades quickly, turning into a moan as he pulls away slightly, curls his fingers, and slides them into me from behind. One and two at first and then three, stretching me.

"You're so fucking wet..." he says, beads of sticky wetness trickling down my thighs.

His free hand kneads my breasts, one at a time, his mouth drawing wet paths down my neck.

"Moan for me, darling."

He presses his weight into me, and I groan with pleasure.



“Mmm... I love when you do that,” he says, threading his fingers through my hair.

He pulls my locks, making me turn my face to him.

His teeth sparkle in the dimness, gleaming between lush, curled lips.

His mouth comes closer, his tongue sweeping over my lips.

“Moan, if you want me to fuck you,” he says.

I breathe out a moan.

“That’s fucking good,” he says, releasing my hair.

I hear his zipper going down and the whisper of ripped foil.

He pushes his knee between my legs, kicks them open, and drives his cock into me, the long upward motion filling me to the brim.

I groan and jerk, crushed against the wall.

He pushes his fingers between my lips, the scent and taste of my arousal rolling over my tongue.

The pleasurable sensation rises again, shutting down my mind and making me feel good. The surge comes strong. He thrusts his fingers into my mouth, and I start sucking on them, craving the real thing.

He slams harder, his breaths coming fast, burning my face.

“You fucking love it,” he mumbles as I clench around his cock.

His fingers fuck my mouth as his free hand locks around my neck, holding me against his body.

I almost gag as he tips me over the edge, the orgasm racing through me, breaking me into a million pieces.

Without waiting a moment longer, he clasps his hands on my hips and pounds me relentlessly, a wild roar spinning in his chest.

“Fucking hell, Senna.”

# S ENNA

A BLASTING sound drills into my ears.

“Damned thing,” I mumble before cursing under my breath again. “Give me a second,” I bark into my headset.

I grab my laptop, sweep the coffee mug off the kitchen counter, and head outside.

“What was that?”

Harper’s voice chimes in my ear, a sweet hum, nothing like the bellowing machine.

“Wait... I can’t hear you,” I shout.

The noise becomes a muffled buzz as I close the door behind me. Clad in a robe that barely covers my bikini, I stroll to the oval-shaped pool.

A soft wind blows through the leaves, making them rustle while the sound of chirping birds rolls in my ears.

This is better.

“It’s the housekeeper,” I say, shedding the robe and stretching on a lounge chair before briefly inspecting my bikini.

Laughter comes from the other end of the line.

“It’s not funny, Harper.”

“Isn’t she supposed to clean your place when you’re not home?”

“Yes, she is, but she’s traveling this week, so I’ve changed the cleaning day so she can leave tomorrow.”

“You have such a good heart,” she says, irony hovering over her words.

“Don’t push it, Harper,” I say, only half-jokingly.

I’m notoriously picky and demanding, and I don’t make it a secret, especially to people who work for me.

I’m the first one to admit I’m set in my ways. Silence, for instance, is one of the things I fundamentally need to function properly. Random drilling noises mess up my brain, scramble my focus and turn me into a nutcase.

The door opens briefly, the harsh noise wafting through the air as a young man slips outside. The noise dies out the moment he shuts the doors closed behind him.

“Now, we’re talking,” I mumble to myself, setting my laptop on my knees and stealing glances at him.

Oblivious to me, he saunters to the pool and starts to clean it, his bare arms flexing into a delicious tease.

“What’s that?”

“You’re a bit nosy, Harper.”

“Aha... There is something.”

“Yeah, there is... You’re bored out of your mind and stick your nose in my business. That’s what it is,” I say, secretly smiling.

Hands clap at the other end.

“Let me guess... Let me guess.”

“It’s not a fucking game,” I say, my fingers running across the keyboard.

“It’s Jack, the hot delivery man.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It’s the, um, hot... handyman? Driver? Personal Shopper? Oh, oh. I know. I know. It’s the hot pool boy. Am I right?”

“Yes, it’s him,” I say as quietly as I can.

“Oh, he’s close,” she says softly as if he could hear her.

“You don’t have to whisper. He can’t hear you.”

“Okay... okay. I remember him. He’s really hot.”

“Mm-hmm,” I murmur, my nose creasing with a smirk as he slides by me.

Giving me a lazy grin, he softly nods.

“Men’s magazine hot?”

“Yup.”

“Where did you find them, Senna?”

“It’s a trade secret.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What can I say? I like to employ people.”

She breathes out a chuckle.

“You mean hot males.”

“They’re, um... qualified, skilled men.”

“Yeah, yeah... Whatever.”

“I employ women as well. And you’re hot.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. And you shouldn’t let that boyfriend of yours tell you otherwise.”

“Well... Your housekeeper and I are the only women who work for you,” she says, ignoring my comment. “Everybody else is male. And hot as hell. Even the freaking lawyer and your accountant abide by this rule.”

“Happenstance.”

She laughs wholeheartedly.

“Let’s say I’m a visual person,” I say, grinning.

“All right, all right... I’d like to know what the formula is.”

“There is no formula. I just have a lucky hand.”

“Do you at least...?” she asks playfully.

My smile drops from my face.

Silence grows between us.

“Senna?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you ever...?”

“What?”

“You know...”

“Get to know them?”

“Yeah...”

“No. Not in that way,” I say, my mood instantly shifting.

She senses the change and stays quiet.

“Okay. Give me the rundown,” I say in a different voice.

She gets the cue fast and starts giving me the updates.

We go over the list of topics before I review her notes. I pick ten, move five to the ‘maybe’ pile, and slash the rest off the list.

“Sounds good,” I say. “Anything else?”

“Yes. There’s a hotel expense on the last statement, and I was wondering if it was business related.”

“What hotel stay?” I ask, distracted.

“A week ago... I wasn’t sure what it was since it was here in town... That’s why I wanted to double-check with you.”

“Oh, that...” I pause, the memory coming back to me, flaring through my senses.

“No, it’s not business related. Anything else?”

“You have a dinner scheduled for tonight. At the Black Rose. Eight o’clock. Adele, Mark, and... a question mark?”

“Shit. I forgot about that,” I say.

“The dinner or the question mark?”

“The fucking question mark.”

“What’s that?”

“A blind date.”



IT’S moments like this when I hate my life, but I have to play the part once in a while. Adele is my only friend from back home.

Adamant as she is, she didn’t want to let go of me despite everything that happened, even though everybody else did.

My family included.

She is the only friend who had the guts to stick with me and not throw me under the bus, even though she was—and still is—one of Evelyne’s best friends.

How she has managed to keep in touch with both of us when Evelyne and I can’t see eye to eye is anyone’s guess.

The fact that Adele doesn’t gossip, take sides, or pass judgment on other people, helps a lot.

With her, what you see is what you get.

In that regard, we are the same. That doesn’t mean she’s not different than me.

She is. A lot, in fact. And in every aspect of her life. Frankly, we couldn’t be more different even if we tried.

We hold different values, too.

In that respect, she’s more like my family, but unlike them, she doesn’t stick her nose in other people’s business, respecting choices different than her own.

These past years, she's had to put up with harsh critiques from my family and hers.

The fact that she stood her ground made me grateful and humble, leaving me no other choice but to keep in touch with her, although it hasn't been easy.

She lives in a world different than mine.

Six years older than me—at thirty years old—she has her life figured out. She's built a great career as a physician and is engaged to a wonderful man.

To help me socialize, she summons me to get together with her once in a while, offering me a semblance of normal life, attempting to bring out the woman I was supposed to be.

Proper, polished, and highly educated. A physician. Like her. A principled woman with moral standing and good values.

Adele has suggested the blind date, the thought of meeting up with a stranger making my skin crawl, but it's the price I have to pay, so I preserve my friendship.

I check the time and walk into the closet before expertly running my eyes over the racks. Gray, black, navy. All designer labels. Few of my old clothes. Relics from years ago when I was someone else.

My eyes drop to the garment bags.

I pick one up and slip my fingers inside. Soft cream fabric brushes against my fingertips.

Cream?

Oh... I remember that day.

I wanted to try a new color and explore a different side of myself.

I peel off the garment bag, hold the dress in front of me and glance in the mirror.

Hmm.

I could make it work.

Admittedly, it looks good against the dark color of my hair. I open a drawer, fumble inside for a few moments, and pull out a set of cream lace lingerie.

Perfect. I slip it on. The soft, delicate lace makes my tanned skin look darker.

I put on my dress and examine myself in the mirror.

It looks nothing like me.

It's so... I don't know.

Virginal?



“HIS NAME IS NICK,” Adele says, giving me a swift once-over.

“You look great,” I say, abruptly stopping the ‘Nick’ conversation.

“Thank you. You look good, too.”

A navy knee-length dress and a string of pearls set off her delicate beauty. Her brown hair, trimmed at the edges, stops short of her shoulders. Her light-blue eyes sparkle, curious.

“How’s business?” she asks tentatively.

“Good,” I say curtly.

I never told her much about my business, and courteous as she is, she never pressed for detailed information.

Her phone vibrates with a message, bringing a soft smile to her lips.

“He’ll be here momentarily,” she says.

I quickly realize I can’t get out of it, so I may as well roll with it.

“Is Nick a physician too?” I ask.

“He’s an engineer. An old friend of Mark’s. He recently moved to Florida, makes good money, and has his own home.



He's not married," she adds with the enthusiasm of someone scoring a good buy at the clearance rack.

Seemingly, Nick hits all the qualities she finds desirable in a man.

I say nothing as we exit the ladies' room and cut our way back to the table.

The restaurant is full since many tourists visit the town this time of year. It's cold up north, and the weather is perfect here.

Drinks are on the table. Mark, her fiancé, a tall man with a sturdy frame and honest eyes, rises to his feet.

We take our seats.

"Nick is late. He'll be here in ten minutes," he says.

Adele smiles at him endearingly.

"He texted me as well," she says.

Mark glances at me.

I grin politely, my mind wandering away.

The sad truth is, I couldn't care less if Nick shows up or not. If he looks like a god or not. Or if he's attached or not. I'm not going to be fussy about it.

They are good people and possibly my only friends in the 'normal' world. They're thoughtful, kind, and not damaged. I bet Nick is a good guy, too.

I pause my inner ramblings, curl my fingers around my glass and take a sip.

The main course is already on the table, so we start to eat. Shortly after, we're engrossed in a conversation about the new healthcare law, low reimbursement rates, rising costs of raising kids, and different ways of cooking pasta.

As I drink the second glass of wine, an elegant man saunters to our table. He observes me discreetly, the smile glinting in his eyes, suggesting he likes what he sees.

Fairly tall, with brown hair and green eyes, he exudes charm and fascinating shyness.

Adele makes the introductions.

Nick's hands are soft like his words. He sits next to me, and throughout the evening, I do my best not to lead him in any way.

He's not the man for me.

Based on what I know, he'd be the perfect man for a kind, good woman.

In other words, anyone but me.

Frankly, I'm surprised he's still single.

He's polite, courteous, and attentive. His good manners are a bonus.

Adele was right. He is a catch. Too bad he's not my catch. Unless he has a basement full of decomposed bodies or swings naked from a chandelier, he could make someone very happy, but not me.

I catch him studying me, his face flushed. He's definitely a nice guy, and for some reason, he seems intimidated by women in general and me in particular.

Adele and Mark invite us to their place as soon as we finish dinner. Located halfway between my place and downtown and minutes away from the hospital where she works, their house is part of a subdivision in a nice area with custom-made homes.

Many, like theirs, have a lake view.

Despite living not far from me, I've never invited them to my place.

For practical reasons, if nothing else. It's hard to explain a 1.5 million dollar home when you're twenty-four, have no degree, and are single. So I keep my mouth shut and my life private.

As the men settle in the living room, clashing ideas in a political debate, Adele and I head to the kitchen.

It's a beautiful, cozy space with wood cabinets, stainless steel appliances, and a large breakfast table. Potted plants sit

on the counters.

“Nothing for me,” I say as she sets four cups on a serving platter.

“You should try it. That’s why I insisted on skipping dessert at the restaurant. This is by far the best ice cream I’ve ever had.”

“Okay... I’ll taste it then. Just a little.”

“It’s not like you need a diet,” she says, her gaze sliding down on me.

“It’s not about dieting. I get a sugar rush and can’t sleep. I’m like a seven-year-old.”

“I see... So what do you think?” she asks, scooping out ice cream from three containers, all bearing the label of the same Italian store.

Tilting her chin up, she motions to the living room.

“I think he’s a great guy,” I say. “Like Mark. And he needs a woman like you,” I add, grinning.

“Flattering. But what do you really think?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Well... I think he likes you.”

“He probably does,” I murmur, saddened.

“He would treat you nicely,” she says, styling the food.

“Let me do it.”

I push to my feet and nudge her to the side.

“Do you have any cream?” I ask.

“Yes.”

She spins to the refrigerator and pulls out a container.

I pour the cream into a bowl, add icing sugar, and turn the hand mixer on.

Moments later, we lick soft peaks from our fingers.

“I know,” I say.

Her eyes move to me, her eyebrows tilting into a questioning look.

“I know he’ll treat me nicely. That’s not the problem,” I go on.

Well, it’s kind of a problem, but I can’t admit it without looking like a lunatic.

“Then what is it?”

“I’m not the woman that he needs.”

I scoop out dollops of soft, glistening whipped cream, let them slide off the spoon, and watch them plop onto the ice cream before grating a square of dark chocolate, brown curls landing on the luscious cream.

“Mmm... That looks delicious,” she murmurs, her eyes gleaming with a smile.

She wipes the counter clean while I fish Maraschino cherries from a jar and drop one in each cup.

“Anyway, you know better, but men like Nick are hard to find. He could be your plus one at Isabel’s engagement party,” she says.

“Yeah, he could, but I’m not sure I want to go there anyway.”

She looks baffled.

“It’s Isabel, for God’s Sake. She’s been bugging me since they set a date for the party. She wants you there. Admittedly, more than anyone else, but you can’t let her down. She’s the only family member who doesn’t hold a grudge against you.”

“That’s because she was too young. Anyway... It’s not so much about her as it is about them.”

“It’s been five years. People forget. It can’t be that bad after all this time.”

“Yes, it can.”

I smile bitterly as I slip into a pensive mood. Memories from a distant past come rushing to me. We used to do so

many things together. Adele Martin and us, the three Lloyd sisters.

“I’ll think about it, but I’m not going to involve Nick.”

“He’s probably going to get an invitation anyway, so you might as well snatch him before someone else does. It will be easier to face your family. Trust me.”

# S ENNA

I SUGGESTED DIMMING THE LIGHTS, hoping it would kill his jitters. While tasting ice cream, he's made his proposal.

Fucking without having any expectations, like a trial test of sorts.

He's used different words. No strings attached. A one-night stand. Okay. Whatever.

I spelled out my conditions. He knew I couldn't give him what he wanted, but he said yes. Yes to everything.

I hope he doesn't change his mind. Because I won't.

I can't do relationships.

I've never done it or attempted to be in one, and I'm not going to start now.

I've also never fucked a regular guy. This is a first for me, and honestly, I don't expect much. Not for me, anyway. And it has nothing to do with him.

It's solely because of how I am, but he will never know.

I don't want to hurt his feelings, so I'll keep everything short and on point. I don't need him to tell me lies or to romance me.

I don't need foreplay, poems, flowers, or a serenade. And even if we successfully fuck, that doesn't mean he'll be my date at Isabel's engagement party. If things turn out half decent, I'll make sure he is a satisfied man when I leave his place.

The door swings open, and Nick enters the room holding two glasses half-filled.

His house is spacious and brand new.

It's a subdivision I'm familiar with since I've bought a couple of properties here. His place is decluttered and tastefully decorated like a home staged for sale.

The living room is vast and opens into the kitchen, and the layout is quite popular with the residents of this area. The furniture has an elegant espresso finish, a nice contrast to the gray marble.

Large glass doors usher in the view of the blue-lit pool and manicured backyard.

He edges closer, his eyes sparkling with mixed emotions. I detect excitement and nervousness. He must be close to Mark's age. Somewhere in his early thirties.

The soft tremble of his fingers tells me not many women have slept with him in his bed. Even if they have, they must've been even more anxious than he is.

I drink wine as he brings the short glass of bourbon to his lips and takes a swig.

We're both standing.

I spin around, place my drink on the coffee table and turn to him.

"Do you, um...?" he murmurs.

I slide my finger to his lips.

He goes silent as I pull down my zipper and shimmy out of my dress. His eyes stay locked with mine.

My lips curl into a faint smile as I open his shirt and peel it off his shoulders.

Brushing the silky hair dusting his chest, I lean into him and softly kiss him. A smile glints in his eyes. He sucks in a long, quiet breath.

I've never seen a man so nervous.

I dip my eyes.

He's well-built.

While I wouldn't necessarily see him lift weights in a gym, I could envision him as an outdoors enthusiast.

"Senna?"

"Shh."

I nudge him to the couch.

He lowers himself, his gaze drifting below my chin. I let him study me before I set my knees on either side of him and sit on his lap.

His arms loop around me as I lower my mouth, cup his face, and teasingly run the tip of my tongue across his lips.

His eyes flicker with surprise. Slowly, I roll my hips and grind against his groin, his shaft growing hard between my legs.

Smoothly, I flick my bra open and tear it off my shoulders.

He brings his hands to my chest and cups my breasts before gently kneading them while I rub my crotch against his erection, pushing my chest into his touch.

Tipping my face down, I slip my tongue between his lips.

His response comes quickly.

He tastes good, and he's a skillful kisser. We explore each other for a few good moments, his body swiftly getting warm.

Growing confident, he deepens the kiss, and our tongues move slowly in a dance of lust.

"That's good..." I purr, filled with icicles inside.

He likes to kiss, and I do too, so we enjoy each other for a few minutes before I tear away.



Silently, I slide to the floor and kneel between his legs, my fingers moving quickly to undo his pants.

Deftly, I cuff his erection and caress him, his eyes sparkling with lust and anticipation.

I cup his balls and stroke him with my tongue before wrapping my lips around his crown and slowly pulling him deep into my mouth.

He moves his hips, and it doesn't long before his control diminishes.

Breathing heavily, he spreads his legs a little more, and his hand comes to my head to press my mouth against his groin.

I like that a lot.

I rise to my feet when he's ready and slip my panties off. He watches me in awe, his gaze drifting over my body, his fist tight around his cock.

I snatch the condom from a nearby table.

He stretches his hand out, wanting to put it on, but I wag my finger at him, rip the foil, pull the condom out, and roll it down.

He twitches when I touch him.

Ecstatic, he watches me straddle him again, sliding down and hugging his hard meat with my core.

Leaning back into the couch, he stares at me, his eyes heavy with pleasure, his breaths shallow.

"This feels good," I say, acting again.

It's not that he doesn't feel good.

He does feel good.

And he looks good as well, his face glowing from his arousal, his stare becoming blank and unfocused.

I grind on him and close my eyes, focusing solely on him, increasing the pace when he needs it the most and slowing down as he nears his climax.

I like him—I really do—and I wish things could be different, but there’s a wall between us, a line I never crossed, a mystery I never solved.

Following the script, I moan and groan and quietly growl.

His balls tighten, his body is tense, and his chest heaves, clueing me in.

“I’m coming, baby...” I purr, closing my fists in his hair.

He clutches my waist, pushing his hips up, his cock spearing me while I move faster. He shuts his eyes, digging holes into my skin with his fingers.

Soft tingles emerge between my legs before fading quickly while he thoroughly enjoys his orgasm, and I quietly observe him.

I’m so tense and frustrated now I could cry.

It’s a painful reminder of who I am.

Panting, I slide to his side, acting till the end. Showing him how much I liked it.



“YOUR DINNER...”

“Yes... It was good,” I say.

I snatch up an apple from a plate, stop in the kitchen, where I fill up my cup of coffee, and head to the oversized red garnet sofa in my living room.

I place my drink on the table, slide onto the couch, and set my laptop on my lap.

“It was charity work,” I say mostly to myself.

Harper’s voice rolls in my ear.

“What was that?”

“Last night was mostly charity work,” I say, unable to stifle a smile.

“It was something that you loved, at least?”

“Yes, I loved it... But it was still charity, and I didn’t get anything out of it,” I murmur, grinning.

Luckily, she couldn’t see me. Otherwise, she’d figure me out quickly.

“Okay. Let’s get to the business at hand,” I say, serious this time.

She goes over the topics with me, the publishing schedule, and the advertising budgets.

The rest of the day goes by fast.

Ten new curated stories hit the website by the end of the day, and traffic spikes. I check the ad campaign analytics and social media accounts.

Respond to nothing, ignore the unread emails, and text Harper.

Me: Clean my Inbox.

The natural light fades slowly until only the blue glow of my laptop screen lights the room. Fall is already here, and the days are getting shorter.

My stomach growls.

I set the laptop on the table, turn the lights on, saunter across the spacious living room and enter the open kitchen.

It’s a huge house, much bigger than I needed, but it was too good of a deal not to pass off, so I bought it.

It was a way to park some cash and make money when I sold it. And I will at one point or another.

I could easily score half a million if I sell it now, even more, if I wait a few more months. I bought it new.

It’s a four-bedroom, four-bathroom Tuscan-inspired pool home with a paved driveway, backyard pool, and a wine cellar.

The finishes are top quality. Natural stone and wood flooring, arched doorways, plantation shutters, a gourmet

Italian-style kitchen with granite countertops, and custom-made wood cabinets.

Natural light flows through the house all day long, the open plan making the transition between the rooms a breeze.

There's a stone fireplace on the patio, and a couple more are carved inside the house.

Stairwells connect the first floor to the second level, where I sometimes choose to sleep. Most of the time, I end up on the couch in the living room where I work.

The first floor alone is spacious enough to host a ball.

Relishing the cold feel of the marble against my soles, I pivot and crack the fridge door open. Fruit and juices. And vegetables. Hmm. I'm really hungry, and I'm itching to go out for the first time in months.

The weather is perfect.

It's getting close to the point where it's cold enough to slip on a pair of jeans and even boots if you care for fashion.

But it's Florida, after all, and I could wear shorts and flip-flops without getting frostbite.

I jog upstairs and walk into the closet.

Veering from fancy clothing, I scoop out a skintight tank top and jeans from a drawer.

I put them on, fasten my belt, pull on a pair of scuffed biker boots, and throw on a leather jacket before I slip outside.

I make a short stop in the ensuite bathroom, run my fingers through my messy hair, touch up my eyeliner, and pull away.

I pick up the car keys from the counter and swish outside.

A Harley would match my attire, but my bike is in the shop, so the black '67 Camaro will do. The gates lock swiftly behind me when I leave my property.

I pulled in front of Jill's around nine o'clock.

It's a medium-sized bar in a so-so area. A favorite stop for bikers, sketchy characters, late-nighters, and hookers. The

crowd has gotten a lot younger this year. By younger, I mean older than me, but mostly under thirty.

I used to come here frequently and be one of the established patrons, but when the summer hit and the humidity started to lick my skin, I took a break.

For a few months, I rarely, if ever, went out.

I bring the car to a smooth stop not far from the entrance. The sidewalks are packed, the roaring sound of the exhaustion pipes turning a few heads.

I'm hardly an attention seeker.

I spent a great deal of time and money to keep a low profile, paying the personal price that comes with it.

Whether it's keeping people I care for, like Adele and Mark, at a distance or not making new friends and having them over at my house.

Besides Harper, who worked at my place a couple of times, and the people I employ to work around the house, no one knows who I am, what I do for a living, or where I live.

I'm not keen to draw attention to myself here either, but I love this car, the loud engine being one of the reasons, and then the way it rolls onto the open road.

I turn off the engine, collect my phone and keys, and slither out.

A couple of SUVs are parked in front of the entrance. Men clad in jeans and tank tops lean against them.

A few feet away, a couple of women are smoking and chatting.

They're too sober to be patrons and too scantily clad not to be working girls.

Noisy like a bunch of kindergartners, the men shout, laugh, and curse, putting out a show to garner the women's attention.

What do I know?

Perhaps, they're pimping the women. I tuck my phone into my jacket and strut across.

People come and go, the main doors flipping open constantly.

As I draw closer, a voice booms in the air.

"Oh.... Look who's here," the man drawls before smacking his lips.

Catcalls trail me as I near the sidewalk.

"Senna, baby. What happened to you, darling? Found yourself a good cock? Haven't seen you in ages, baby."

I shoot the man a glare.

Can he talk any louder?

He keeps yapping, his voice annoying like a fucking megaphone. Half of the people on the sidewalk turn their heads and take me in.

Fucking jerk.

The hookers take notice too. I cut my eyes at the idiot, his face familiar somewhat, yet hardly someone I remember talking to.

Without glancing at him, I lift my middle finger and head to the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement.

The thug is hardly the quitter.

Swaying his hips, he makes a beeline for me, grinning. The men behind him are no better, whistling and howling. More males attach to the group.

Great.

"No cock? Oh... I see... Senna likes pussy," he shouts for the whole street to hear.

I spend a few seconds studying him before swinging my eyes to the other people and skimming their faces.

Not far from them, a man who doesn't seem to be part of their group sits on the concrete curb.

He doesn't look at me.

A cigarette tucked between his fingers, he scans the road, the cars pulling in and the people walking out.

As long as I stare at him, he doesn't spare a glance in my direction or the man who keeps badgering me.

Just as I step onto the sidewalk, the idiot running his mouth strides toward me and blocks my way. He halts in front of me, his hands planted on his hips.

I raise my eyes.

"Get out of my way," I bark, my short fuse coming in handy.

Laughter rocks his chest.

"Oh, someone's pissed."

He turns to his friends.

"It may be that someone hasn't gotten dick in a long... long time," he says, throwing a suggestive glance at his buddies while wiggling his eyebrows.

Laughter fills the air.

A stare burns a hole into my face, making me flick my gaze to the side. The man sitting on the sidewalk shifts his eyes away from me, focusing back on the road.

"Isn't it so, Senna baby?"

The man harassing me closes the space between us, rakes his fingers through my hair, and pulls me into him.

My fists meet his chest with force.

The blow takes him by surprise, making him lose his balance. He straightens his back and leans closer, trying to touch me again.

"Get your hands off me!" I snarl, dead fucking serious.

My voice rips into the air as my eyes cut through him.

His smile fades, and everybody freezes. The man sitting on the pavement rises to his feet.

It takes a few moments before the jerk in front of me steps back, and I almost hear a collective sigh of relief.

As odd as it seems, I saunter in, unfazed.

The place hasn't changed much, but the crowd is somewhat different. A few new people work at the bar, along with my old buddy, Scottie.

He catches sight of me and greets me with a nod. I stop at the counter and give him a hug before he motions me to my favorite table.

Tucked-in, next to the window, the spot is perfect for surveilling the street while keeping an eye on the inside of the sports bar.

He sets my drink on the table and walks away. My gaze shifts to the people outside.

The crowd has thinned out substantially now that the show has come to an end. The rowdy men and working girls are nowhere in sight.

I crane my neck and scan the sidewalk looking for the mysterious man.

I don't remember seeing him here before.

Hoping to glimpse him again, I swivel my head and search for him. My gaze sweeps the street up and down until my eyes find his broad shoulders.

He walked to the other side—it seems. Abandoning the corner, he moved closer to the entrance.

Feet away from me, he leans against the streetlight pole, and his face comes into focus.

He flexes his arms, the flame of a metallic lighter brushing the tip of a cigarette tucked between his lips. He narrows his eyes and takes a quick drag, glancing at the road just as a few cars pull in.

He briefly scans them as they roll into the parking lot. Men and women climb out and amble to the bar.



He gives them a quick last glance before shifting his focus away.

Another hour passes, and fewer cars pull in.

Sliding his hands into his low-slung jeans, he restlessly looks down the street, flicking his cigarette with the tip of his tongue.

He brings his long-fingered hand to his lips, tears the cigarette away, and blows the smoke out.

A silver ring glints on his right hand.

I take a good look at him as he keeps observing the cars and the patrons.

Tall, he has a chiseled face that's hard to forget. Sculpted cheekbones, bedroom eyes, and a teasingly drawn mouth.

Strong, proportionate jaws and a straight nose.

He sports a gray T-shirt that hugs his chest tightly, destroyed jeans, a biker leather jacket, and scuffed black boots.

I swing my eyes back up. His face looks young. Not young like me. Younger.

A few bangs fall over his eyes, brushing his cheeks. Light brown hair with sun-kissed strands, long enough to brush his neck, get tousled and look like a sexy mess.

He takes a couple of steps toward the window.

As if aware of my stare and my curious eyes, he threads his fingers through his hair and combs it all back. The faint smile curving his lips gives him a slight air of danger.

His eyes narrow again as he glances in my direction. My stomach is tied in knots.

Can he see me?

Teasingly parting his lips, he lifts an eyebrow and looks away, stretching his corded neck.

His hands rake through his hair again, pulling the jacket up. I notice his flat, tight abdomen and narrow, muscular hips.

Suddenly, he swaggers closer to the window, stopping right in front of me. If it wasn't for the glass wall separating us, I could probably touch him.

Swallowing hard, I set my glass on the table and lean back in my chair, studying him thoroughly.

He can't possibly see me. The glass is thick and dark.

Tilting his head back, he narrows his eyes and looks down his nose, pouting around his cigarette.

My heart begins to flutter while his eyes stay on me as if he sees me.

Perhaps he examines his reflection. Whatever he does, I can't take my eyes off him.

It's been some time since anyone has held my attention for so long. Scratch that. Nobody has ever held my attention. But this has to do with way more than his looks.

His expression hardens, his eyes drilling into me from behind the glass, making my heart jolt.

Can he really see me?

I'm pretty sure he can't. I tear my eyes away briefly and shoot them back at him again. He's still there, staring at me, his head tipped to the side, an eyebrow lifted.

I cock my head to the side too. He peels his eyes away from me. Or what I think it's me.

Lips curled into a smirk, he swaggers away.

Shit.

He saw me.

I lose sight of him for a moment. When I find him again, a black car pulls up in front of the bar, and he walks to it.

The window on the passenger's side goes down while the car engine is still running.

He braces his hands against the top of the car, bends at the waist, and talks to the driver before flicking his head to the side and flashing a sexy grin.

My nipples harden, and my neck gets hot.

What the fuck?

His lips move, saying words I can't make out.

I should be able to figure out what he says if my focus weren't completely shattered.

I notice a stark contrast between his smirk—that could make a woman come—and the turmoil in his eyes.

“You need another one?” someone asks.

Startled, I shift my eyes away from that man.

“Huh?”

Standing by the table, Scottie motions to the glass.

“No. I'm good,” I say, looking around.

The bar is half empty.

I whip my eyes to my phone, check the time and raise my eyes to the bartender.

“Listen... Do you know this guy by any chance?” I ask, moving my head to the side and pointing to the window.

“What guy?” he asks, glancing at the street.

I shift my eyes to the window.

The sidewalk is empty, a black car gliding away.

# S ENNA

BLINDFOLDED, with my hands and ankles tied, I rattle the chair.

He grabs the back of my hair, bends over, and growls in my ear.

“Sit tight, for fuck’s sake.”

My hair bristles while twisted pleasure rams through me.

He straightens his back, his heat rolling over me, the scent of his cum drifting to me.

The chair I sit on is wedged between his legs.

With his feet planted on the floor on either side of me, and his groin positioned in front of my face, I can smell and almost taste him.

His hard-on brushes my lips, needing access to my mouth.

I keep it closed while he brushes my lips with his thumb.

“Open your fucking mouth,” he says, his voice abrasive, his touch rough.

I unclench my teeth, and his callous thumb sweeps my tongue before his cock slides between my lips, filling my mouth.

A hand clutches the back of my head, the other cupping my face.

I swirl my tongue around him, his taste and smell hitting my nerve endings fast, pleasure surging through me.

I take him in deeper before bobbing my head and rolling my lips.

“See... You fucking like it,” he says in a low, husky tone. “Do it now,” he orders, his voice losing its raw edge, becoming clearer.

Even tender.

His moves are softer, too, as he gently guides my head.

His groan lifts in the air and rolls in my ears, feeding the growing need inside me.

I suck him harder, eager to push him to the edge, and he’s right on the cusp of losing control.

“Fuck, Senna,” he says softly.

He cuts my ties, pulls me up, and nudges me to the bed.

On all fours, I’m waiting. I hear a metallic sound as his jeans and belt hit the floor.

He rips a condom wrapper, puts it on, and spreads my wetness with his fingers before spanking me a few times and pushing his hard meat into me.

It’s perfect.

I spread my thighs while flicking my bottom up, and the pretension is all gone.

We no longer need to act. Not me. And not him.

He grabs my hair and pulls it all back, forcing me to arch my spine as he thrusts his dick into me roughly.

Just the way I like it.

He slaps my butt, making my skin sting while driving his cock into me.

Panting, he hooks his fingers into my hips and pounds me hard, the sound of skin hitting skin filling the room.

My center tingles as swarms of throbbing bits swirl between my thighs.

“Oh, Abel...” I burst out.

Groaning and shuddering, he moves into me fast, bringing me up and giving me much-needed relief.



STILL WET FROM THE SHOWER, Abel walks into the bedroom, sporting a towel around his waist.

I take in his athletic body.

“You look good...” I say, flashing a mischievous grin.

“Your pussy got it good, baby,” he tosses back at me. “It’s not as if you’ve never seen me before.”

I motion to the table.

“Your money is there.”

Casually, he glances in that direction before veering toward the bed. He slides onto the mattress next to me, props his head on his hand, and studies me, curious.

“The stubble does you justice,” I say, smiling warmly.

He ignores my comment, his eyes moving over my naked body, his hand cupping a breast.

“You’re a strange woman, Senna,” he says in a softer voice.

“Am I? What about the other women you take care of?”

He sinks his head into a pillow, folding his arm under it. A grin creases his lips, beaming in his eyes.

He’s a handsome man. I’ll give him that.

“There are only two other women... You know I don’t go for volume, but I do like specific requests. Besides, I stumbled

into this. It's not like I'm out there whoring."

"You get paid for it."

"I do. I consider it a reward for a job well done," he says, chuckling. "I'm not doing it for money, baby. I have enough money and a well-paying job," he says, serious this time.

"Yet... If the other women pay my rate, your little hobby tops your salary a few times over."

"It does, but I'd fuck you for free any day."

My eyes narrow with a smile.

"What about the other two? What's their story?" I ask, handing him his glass of wine.

"One is married and lives in a sexless marriage. And the other one is a businesswoman who wants a reliable dick without the headache."

I laugh.

"Meaning?" I say, lifting an eyebrow.

He grins, amused.

"You know... Stroking his ego, facing his insecurities, slobbering over him once in a while to make him feel good so he can get it up..." he says.

We share a chuckle.

"You fucking know all that. Why do you ask me?" he murmurs, flashing a playful smile.

"Are you sure she's a woman?" I joke.

He laughs softly.

"Damn sure. I've checked her."

"Sounds like a match made in heaven," I say, picking up my glass of wine from the nightstand and bringing it to my lips.

I take a swig.

"It does, doesn't it?"

“So what do they want from you?” I ask.

His eyes slant to me.

“Regular stuff. Getting dick, basically. Some fake romance, thrown in for good measure. Whatever turns them on.”

“What about you? What do you like?”

“I like pussy. Not so much the bullshit that comes with it. I’ve tried it before... Sex and romance. Sex was good, but I struggled with the restrictions attached to a relationship. You know... The things I wasn’t supposed to say or do or whatever. It was tiresome and got old quickly, so the passion died out. It always does when you run empty for a while. And I did for a long time.”

His smile fades, his eyes shifting back to me.

“What about you? What’s your story?”

“You know my story.”

“No, I don’t.”

“There’s not much to it,” I say, a twisted smile creeping across my lips.

He looks at me intently.

“I’ve never been any different than I am right now. That’s all I know.”

“What about romance?”

“Never happened.”

“Have you tried it?”

“I didn’t need to. It doesn’t do shit for me. I’ve never had the calling for it. In the same way, I’ve never been attracted to the idea of getting married or having kids. It’s just not in my blood.”

He searches my eyes.

I catch a sliver of concern and smile.



“I’m good, though. I don’t feel like I’m missing out on anything, so don’t feel bad about me.”

“Are you sure you’re a woman?” he jokes, trying to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

I nod, stretching a smile.

“I think you know the answer to that,” I murmur before gently kissing his lips. “I have to go now,” I add.

He curls his hand around my wrist and locks my eyes.

“Stay... Please... The next round is on me,” he says, a warm grin in his eyes.

I cup his face.

“It wouldn’t work, Abel. Trust me.”

Surprise colors his gaze.

“You don’t like me?”

“I do like you... You’re a good man, and you fuck me phenomenally. And if I weren’t broken, you’d be the perfect man for me.”

“Since when fucking someone phenomenally can’t tip the scale?”

I sense humor and regret in his words.

I try to backpedal, fully aware I’m not making any sense.

“I’m strange like you said, and it’s not a transient thing. Chances are I’m gonna be like that for some time, perhaps forever, and nobody deserves this type of damaged goods.”

His finger brushes my face tenderly.

“Just because you like it rough and you pay for it doesn’t mean you’re damaged,” he murmurs.

We share a stare, absorbing the meaning of his words before we laugh.

“Yeah... It doesn’t sound damaged at all,” I say, amused.

“Anyway, what I meant—”

My smile dies out.

“I know what you mean, and you may be right. There could be a path to a better, softer me, but I don’t know if I will ever find it. I can’t take anyone on that journey. Not you, of all people.”

I lean to and kiss him again, his hand sliding off my arm as I pull away. I grab my clothes and drape them over me, his eyes following me, his hand reaching for his growing cock.

Smiling, I pull my zipper up.

“Next time, Abel... Next time.”



THE EVENING SETS IN QUICKLY.

Cars zoom in and out, but only a few people walk into the bar.

The temperature is pleasant, and the air is a bit crisp, reminding me of the real fall and my childhood home up north.

“It’s a quiet Friday,” I say, my fingers brushing the cold glass.

“It must be the weather,” Scottie says, running his hand over the table, brushing off invisible crumbs.

I glance at the window.

Drops of rain stain the glass like silent tears.

“Food?”

“Yes.”

“Same?”

“Uh-huh. Add a side of fries and pickles.”

“So you’re back for good,” he says, his lips arching into a smile.

“What do you mean?”

He lowers his eyes.

Of all the people working here, he knows me best.

“Uh... You mean... I’m a regular again,” I say, smiling.

He nods.

“It’s because I like the food...” I say.

He lifts an eyebrow, staring at me incredulously.

“No, no. It’s really good,” I argue.

“I wasn’t talking about the food.”

Hmm.

I guess it wasn’t that hard to figure out my new obsession.

As of late, I have come to Jill’s religiously every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Nine o’clock sharp.

I always occupy the same little booth by the window and spend most of my time staring at the mysterious man who also happens to show up regularly but never walks inside.

Very few people have tried to approach him, and they have seldom been regulars.

From time to time, he disappears from the front of the building, and he’s usually gone for good by midnight.

I never see him coming or going, but my heart jerks whenever I catch a glimpse of him or notice his absence.

Pushing my car keys to the side, I glance at Scottie.

“So, who is he?” I ask.

“I don’t know his name. He’s only been inside the bar a couple of times. People have a nickname for him. They call him... No Ash.”

“Meaning?”

He shrugs.

“I don’t know. Maybe his name is Ash.”

“How long has he been around?”

“A couple of months or so. Since the beginning of the fall. I don’t remember seeing him before the end of August. He rarely comes in for food or drinks. He’s here for one thing and one only,” he says.

His pause makes me raise my eyebrows and shoot him a questioning look.

“Turning tricks,” he says in a quiet, lower voice.

“Really?” I ask, unable to stifle my surprise.

I glance out the window again, hiding my baffled expression.

Cold rain dribbles on the sidewalk, and cars swish by the establishment, but none stop.

The parking lot is deserted.

“Like an escort?” I murmur, flicking my eyes back to him.

“We’re not exactly a five-star hotel, so I wouldn’t call him an escort.”

“What kind of customers?” I ask, my voice ringing cold.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen his clients. Cars pick him up and drop him off, but I can tell it’s not women. They don’t pay for sex. Not on the streets, anyway. Men are the ones who look for guys like him on the streets.”

“Oh...” I mutter, disappointed.

He picks up on the nuance.

“Are you interested?” he asks, half seriously.

“No... no. It’s not my thing,” I say, dismissing the idea with a forced smile. “I was just curious. He seems, um... He seemed different than everybody else,” I mumble, bothered by his absence while hoping to see him tonight.

“You think he’ll show up?” I ask.

“Probably. He’s never missed a night,” he says and walks away.

Minutes later, he sets a large plate of food on the table and vanishes behind the bar.

I eat in silence.

The smell of french fries, grilled fish, and lemon zest entices my appetite, keeping my mind away from that man.

My hope to see him tonight has vanished by the time I finish up.

It's too late for him to show up.

I slide my finger over my phone and start reading a text message when the back door swings open, and Ash or No Ash walks in.

Heat spreads over my cheeks.

He runs his fingers through his hair and flicks his head several times, shaking off the rain.

Silently, he swaggers to the bar. Scottie locks my eyes, his chin pointing to the man.

The man climbs onto a barstool and orders a drink.

He rests his elbows on the counter and stares vacantly at his glass.

His fingers go through his hair again.

He sports dark jeans, a black T-shirt, an emblazoned racer jacket, and biker boots. A silver necklace glints on his chest, matching the ring on his right hand.

The bartender sets another glass of scotch in front of him. He lifts it to his lips and tosses it back in one smooth motion.

I push my plate to the side, grab my keys and phone, and head to the bar. The man sitting next to him turns his head to me, giving me a quick once-over.

The man I'm obsessed with doesn't even flinch.

I motion to Scottie, who walks behind the bar and meets me at the other end. Slipping my fingers inside my jacket, I retrieve a hundred dollar bill.

"Cover his drinks and keep the change," I say, motioning to my left.

"Thanks."

He collects the money and pulls away.

Without wasting another moment, I make a beeline for the back door and exit the place.

The air is cold, and it drizzles again.

I walk down the dimly lit alley to the corner of the building before heading to the parking lot.

Footsteps pound the ground behind me.

They come closer. And closer.

“Hey!”

The burst of anger in his voice hits me in my chest.

He sounds different than I expected. His voice is thick and smoky with a sharp edge to it, and it vibrates in his throat and chest, soaked in anger.

I should pick up the pace and just disappear.

Instead, I listen to my gut and stop. A few long strides put him right in front of me.

“Who the fuck are you?” he growls, sounding more like ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’.

“I can ask you the same thing... No Ash,” I say, unfazed.

He scorches me with his eyes.

“I don’t need your fucking drinks,” he barks, his gaze roving over me.

I slip my hands into my pockets and lean against the wall. Defiantly, I look at him and say nothing.

Fury simmers in his eyes. I don’t break my stare. Not even bat a lash.

Quirking my lips into a cold smirk, I run my gaze over him as well.

His pecs are hard and carved beneath his T-shirt.

I take in his shoulders and the hard lines of his torso before dipping my gaze to his tapered waist and tight hips.

The way his jeans hug him below the waist makes my breath hitch. He has those teasingly tilted hips that come with a hard backside, muscular thighs, a perfectly sized package, and a circling, thrusting motion in the bedroom that leaves you breathless.

“Do you hear me?” he barks again, disconcerted by my silence.

A fresh scent lifts off his skin. I almost want to sniff him, but the two rational brain cells I still have left warn me to drop it.

The soft light of a lamppost brings his face into focus.

I silently gasp.

He’s even more striking than I thought. He has a beautifully drawn face with high cheekbones, an angled jawline, and well-defined lips.

His eyebrows—now pinched into a furrowed line—make his eyes remarkably expressive, their color hard to guess under the pale light.

His hair is long enough to run my fingers through it.

“There’s nothing you can do about it...” I toss back at him. “I give money to whoever the hell I want,” I deadpan, flashing an icy smile at him.

He digs into his pocket, pulls out a wad of cash, and hands it to me.

My hands curl up into fists before diving deep into my pockets.

“I don’t need your money,” I say.

“I don’t need yours, either.”

He tugs at my arm.

“Don’t you dare to touch me,” I bark, baring my teeth at him.

Furious, he slaps his hands against the wall on either side of me. Boxing me in, he leans to me, his lips inches from

mine.

“You shouldn’t have given me money if you didn’t want me to touch you,” he growls against my temple.

Without another word, he pulls my zipper down, opens my jacket, and slips the cash into my pocket.

While stashing it inside, he grazes my breasts with his fingers, and I sense a rush between my legs.

Baffled, I flick my gaze to his face.

This has never happened to me before.

I’ve never had this kind of reaction to a man, especially in this sort of circumstance. It should make me happy.

Instead, it saddens me.

I flick my head to the side to conceal my eyes when he clasps my chin and turns my face to him.

His eyebrows tilt up in surprise as he glimpses my expression. The moments tick by, and none of us is keen to speak. He searches my eyes for a few more seconds before finally breaking the silence.

“Stay away from me,” he says quietly while taking his hands away from me.

Holding my eyes, he steps back before spinning around and pulling away.



# S ENNA

“Do you want me to put up the tree, Miss?”

“No. I’ll do it. You can leave now. Thank you,” I say.

The housekeeper collects her bag and walks out the door.

I slide the laptop onto the table, flip the lid shut, and saunter outside.

The weather is warmer now than it was a couple of days ago. I shed my clothes and slip into the pool, enjoying the quiet afternoon.

Trees, blooming shrubs, and a wall of bricks separate my backyard from the neighbors’ house.

They are quiet people, and luckily, they’re very private too.

A few more laps help me unwind.

One of these days, I have to go to the ocean. I haven’t been to the beach in a long time.

Come to think of it, I haven’t had a Christmas tree in a while, either.

Christmas trees were always the attraction point in my parents’ house as I was growing up, and the food and parties were a bonus for the adults.

Sophisticated, wealthy people were part of my parents' inner circle. Money always attracts money—my mom used to say, having an eye on us, the girls, while we were growing up, and the suitors.

Evelyne was the first in line. Six years older than me, the same age as Adele, she made it to the parties way before I could even crack the door open to take a peek.

By default, I was clumped with Isabel, my younger sister. Four years younger, she wasn't anywhere close to being allowed to get a glimpse of the adult world.

My mom set the rules, and we couldn't even form an opinion on the men lined up for Evelyne's hand, let alone dream about them. My mom said we had to wait our turn, and that's exactly what we did.

It was a perfect life for my family and me. At least for a while, it was. Growing up, I dreamed of the moment when I'd be the attraction point of those parties, surrounded by the most eligible bachelors in the county.

One summer evening, all my dreams turned to dust.

Who knows? Perhaps it was meant to be that way. Maybe it was faith or a curse running through my blood.

I push those troubling thoughts back, pull out of the pool, and walk to the lounge area.

Absentmindedly, I run a towel over my body and look up at the sky, flashing a nostalgic smile.

All I do these days is push away everything that once mattered to me. My memories and my old me.

Mostly, I try to forget that soft, innocent girl who used to dance, read, and watch colorful butterflies flapping their wings for hours.

I want to erase that girl from my memory, but sometimes she looks at me, laughing and scolding me, threatening that she'll never go away.

She was so pure and innocent. So different than who I am today.

I wind a towel around my body and walk inside.

That girl... She got me in so much trouble. I would kill her with my bare hands if I could.

A beep comes from the couch, and I snatch the phone off the armrest and sift through the messages.

Nick, Adele. Abel?

ARE YOU COMING?

SMILING, I type away.

I start with Abel.

Soon, he'll have to pay me instead of me paying him.



“THE FOOD IS DELICIOUS,” I say politely, dabbing at the corner of my mouth with a Thanksgiving-themed napkin.

“Do you want another slice of pie?” Adele asks.

“No, thank you.”

Her apartment is full of people. Her parents flew in, and a few more couples were added to the mix.

The conversation spans from politics to the latest fad diet and the indiscretions of celebrities attempting to stay relevant.

A soft touch on my shoulder makes me swivel my head.

“Hey.”

I scrape my chair back and turn to Nick.

“Hey,” I say.

“Do you have a moment?”

“Sure.”

I rise to my feet and follow him, furtively glancing at my reflection as we both strut past a large wall mirror.

The white, skintight dress hugs my body, showcasing my silhouette before stopping above my knees. My dark hair drapes over my back and shoulders.

Perched on high heels, I sway my hips ahead of him.

I should've toned down my appearance, especially since I knew he'd be here. I'm not a huntress. At least, not in the open.

And I don't want to be a cock tease, either.

We slip into the study room.

He smoothly closes the door behind us and, without making the slightest noise, leans against the door.

His hair is a bit longer than the last time I saw him, making him look much younger and more adventurous.

His eyes still harbor an ocean of insecurity.

He is a smart man. He knows we are the mismatch of the century, yet he doesn't seem to care.

Our eyes connect.

"Yes?"

"I know you said you're not into dating..." he mutters.

"Uh-huh."

"I want you to come to my place tonight."

Judging by the long exhale following his words, it must've taken him a lot of pondering before making this proposal.

I think about it for a moment, a shred of panic flashing through his eyes.

This would be the second time I broke this rule.

And it's one of my strictest rules, one I've never broken before. Never, ever fuck regular guys, especially the ones that seem good, kind-hearted men.

Abel is good, but he knows how to fend this off if it gets out of hand. I'm not so sure Nick can do the same. I should cut him loose, but his eyes make it so damn hard.

Even if there's nothing in it for me.

I step closer to him, my hands gliding to his chest.

"Listen..."

More angst moves over his face as he braces himself.

Who likes rejection?

"I like you, Nick... You can fuck me tonight and be friends with me, but we can never be more than that. Is that okay with you?"

His chest rises with a rushed gulp of air, his eyes glinting with a smile.

It's either my words or my proximity, but his body seems to close the deal for him.

Nodding in agreement, he curls an arm around my waist and pulls me into him. My hand slides to his groin, my palm running down his fly, brushing his already hard cock. He stirs against my hand, and I begin to stroke him slowly.

His lips part, his breaths getting quickly hotter.

Stretching a wanton smile, I work his fly open and wrap my hand around his shaft.

He watches me in silence as I kneel in front of him. We keep our eyes connected as I roll my lips down and swirl my tongue around him, his throaty groans and iron grip telling me I'm hitting every spot right.

Sliding my lips up and down, I run my tongue along his hardness, relishing how he feels inside my mouth. I take him deep, rewarding him with what he wants.

I feel him hot and turned on, yet my body doesn't spare a tingle.

Panting, he pulls me up, looking at me, his eyes unfocused.

“Let’s finish this up somewhere else,” he says as he tucks his shirt in and fastens his pants.

He takes my hand and pulls me out of the room, making this the shortest Thanksgiving dinner ever.



SENNA

DAYS LATER.

I SHOWED up at Jill’s last Friday and Saturday after Thanksgiving, setting myself up for a colossal disappointment.

I was excited, aching to see that mysterious stranger again.

No, no.

It was more than that. I was craving to see him again.

As irrational as it felt and inexplicable in a way, I let myself be carried away by that feeling, and I didn’t mind waiting for him.

But the nights went by, empty and uneventful.

He didn’t show up last night either, and chances are tonight won’t be any different.

Close to midnight, I notice a man gesturing to someone in the parking lot. I do a double take, and my heart leaps to my throat.

‘There he is,’ sneers a mocking voice in my head, warning me to stay away from him.

I push the pestering thought back and shift my focus to the man who’s taken up residence in my head lately.

Stonewashed, dark jeans sit low on his hips, the fabric slashed, unraveling in places. He wears his signature black

boots and a skintight white T-shirt that sets off his tattooed torso, cut arms, and carved chest.

A low-hung belt snakes around his hips.

He stretches his arm out, the fingers holding his cigarette pointing at something in the distance.

His hand slides through his hair before disappearing into his pocket. He brings his cigarette to his lips, his cheeks going hollow while he takes a drag.

Next, he blows the smoke out, flicks the cigarette to the pavement, crushes it under his boot, and strides to a nearby motorcycle.

A rush of panic sweeps through me.

Before I can think of anything, he straddles his Harley, revs it up, and leaves the parking lot, tail spinning.

A sigh rolls off my lips as I lean back in my chair.

What the hell is wrong with me?

This is a classic trap.

Seemingly, I'm losing my head over someone I know I can't have. And to make things worse, I can't even figure him out.

I ponder for a few more moments, unsure of what to do, if anything. I should probably just go home, take a cold shower and forget about him.

But no, no.

My stubbornness doesn't serve me well this time. I tell myself he might come back, so I stick around.

Close to one in the morning, I lose hope and finally give up on the idea.

It was about damn time.

I glance around. The place is almost empty. Reluctantly, I gather my keys and phone and get ready to leave.

I make a quick stop in the ladies' room, and as I exit the bathroom and enter the narrow corridor in the back, I bump

into a wall of muscles.

He tears away quickly and brushes past me, pushing through the back door and leaving the establishment.

His scent spreads over me like fire.

I suck in what feels like all the air in the hallway and think about it for a moment.

Where is he going?

With nothing better to do, I follow him, swing the door open, and step outside. The night wraps cold around me.

Quietly, I close the door and scan the alley.

A streetlamp casts a faint light across the gray wall.

I stroll to the corner of the building, my footsteps soft and silent. Nervous, I glance over my shoulder, making sure no one has followed me.

I crane my neck out as I reach the corner. Not far from me, I spot a tucked-in area where some employees park their cars. Aside from a dark SUV sitting at the far end, there's no other vehicle in the parking lot.

I move my gaze around, searching. That's when I spot the two men.

Gasping, I scoot back and hide behind the wall.

Fast, shallow breaths tear off my chest. I suck in a gulp of air and look again.

He's right there, standing feet away from me.

Propped on his motorcycle, a cigarette in his hand, head tilted back, and hips angled forward, the second man's mouth connected to his groin.

What the...?

On his knees, the man in front of him bobs his head, his eyes closed as muffled groans crawl up his throat.

Heat disperses over my body, my body reaction taking me by surprise. The rush—as shocking as it is—holds me in place.



I swallow hard a few times.

My wiring must be completely wrong.

Here I am, getting hot while watching them, yet I can't warm up to a man in my bed.

Baffled, I move away from the corner and take a few small steps in their direction, craving a better view.

Not much older than me, the man at his feet is well-dressed and quite attractive. The kind of man you'd meet at an event, perhaps a wedding.

The sort of man you'd take home to meet your parents.

There's something so erotic about him. As I get a better glimpse of his face and, subsequently, his expression, I quickly learn—he loves it.

He loves sucking the man who leans against the motorcycle and seems unmoved by his passion.

I lift my gaze and try to read the standing man's face.

I can't say whether lust or pleasure lurks in his eyes, despite the glistening hard-on entering the man's mouth.

He seems removed from the scene, but even so, the sight of him, his stance, glaring indifference, and, I suspect, his sexuality make me shiver.

The man on the ground groans again.

He flicks his eyes open and notices me, yet he doesn't stop.

Startled, I raise my gaze and meet the standing man's stare. The man I've been obsessed with looks at me with fierce eyes, his gaze burning through me like wildfire.

It's not shock or surprise what I read in his eyes, not even the slightest curiosity. He couldn't care less that I'm here, spying on him.

He slides his hand into the man's hair and rolls his hips—narrowing his eyes at me.

I'm sure he does it on purpose now as much as I know he's eye fucking me. It works. I feel warm, and a pleasurable tension grows in my abdomen.

His tension seems to rise, and a feral edge flashes through his eyes as he preys on me.

He must know how turned-on I am.

This is so messed up.

The man groans at his feet. Slowly, No Ash brings his cigarette to his lips. He takes a drag and blows the smoke to the side before grabbing the man's head with both hands and rocking his hips, fucking his face.

His eyes stay on me, but my gaze dips as I breathlessly obsess over his cock sliding into that man's mouth.

I drop my eyes lower, my gaze snagged by the man at his feet as he starts stroking himself.

Growling his pleasure out, he shoots his load and closes his eyes again, enjoying everything, relived.

I feel his pain and pleasure, and then I raise my gaze and meet his eyes again.

A shudder falls through me as I grasp his emotions.

The standing man's emotions.

Ache and disappointment, a hint of lust and sadness.

It's like an old, bleeding wound, trying to heal inside, yet staying open.

With no hope for resolution.

A slow, bitter smile creases his lips. He brings the cigarette to his lips and takes a slow drag, studying me thoroughly.

His raw gaze flows through me, stirring some wild sensations inside me.

Shaken up, I step backward and stumble into the wall before I turn around and rush back to the bar.

I dash in, frazzled.

I really need a drink.

Perhaps two.

Distracted, I gulp down the alcohol, set the cash on the counter, and walk back to the bathroom. I throw a splash of water on my face, trying to pull myself out of the trance.

“So... Did you enjoy the show?”

The gravelly voice enters me, reverberating over the sound of torn paper.

“What the fuck?” I blurt and glance around, ensuring I’m in the right bathroom.

“There’s no paper towel in the other one,” he says, crumpling the paper into a ball and throwing it into the garbage bin. “Did you?” he asks, his hands clutching his hips.

My eyes fly to his chest and shoulders and then to his bulge.

“What... What?”

I mumble a bit louder the second time, losing my shit.

“Did you like what you saw? You seemed to enjoy it,” he says.

A slow, knowing smile stretches across his kissable lips.

“Whatever...” I toss at him as if I watch men sucking other men every day.

“Why were you following me?” he asks, a smirk tugging at his lips, barely reaching his eyes.

“I, um... I wasn’t following you. I was, uh... I was going home.”

“And yet... You’re still here.”

“I needed a drink.”

“Really?”

His lips curved into an amused grin.

“Was it that good? Or, um... That bad?”

Waving him off, I walk toward the door. Two strides put him right in front of me, blocking my exit. His fist slams the door shut.

Pressing his back against the door, he stares at me.

No smile on his face.

His eyes slice through me, and for the first time ever, I feel the grip of fear.

“I want to hear it. Why are you following me?” he asks in a cold, dark voice.

“I have a business proposition for you,” I say, swiftly regaining my composure.

“I’m listening.”

It takes me a moment to push out the words.

“What is your going rate?” I ask.

An incredulous look slides over his face, a faint smile tilting his lips.

“For what? Sucking my cock?”

His words stir a reaction between my legs, his amused grin hinting that my thoughts beam on my face.

“Oh, you didn’t know that?” he asks, noticing my confusion.

“Know what?” I murmur.

“You thought I fucked for money?”

I lift an eyebrow.

“Yeah... It crossed my mind. You don’t?” I ask cleverly.

He lowers his eyes for a moment, a hot smile sprouting on his lips.

“Technically, I don’t. I let other people suck my dick for money.”

“Oh... I see,” I mumble, barely stifling a roll of my eyes.  
“How is that different?”

His chest vibrates with laughter.

“It’s more like a... niche.”

“Okay. So what’s your going rate?”

“I don’t do women.”

“Oh... You’re gay?”

He purses his lips, crushing a grin.

“Do I look gay?” he asks.

Tilting his head back, he stares down his nose at me, drilling holes into my confidence.

He damn sure knows how good-looking he is.

“I don’t know. You don’t... But that doesn’t mean anything. You don’t look like a pain in the ass either.”

An insolent smile flashes across his lips.

“Are you, or are you not?” I ask.

“No, I’m not.”

“It’s fine if you don’t do women. I’m not hiring you for sex.”

A playful smile rolls over his lips. He brings his hand to his chin and rubs it softly.

I find the pursing of his lips distracting.

“What for, then?”

“I need an escort.”

His eyebrows flick up.

“Escort?”

“Three days max. Island resort in Key West. Everything is paid for. Formal clothing included.”

“Formal clothing?”

“We’re going to a party. We travel together, share a bungalow, and don’t fuck.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, his lazy smile making my panties wet.

“If we fuck, you’re going to be paid extra.”

His teeth scrape his lip, his eyes weighing me, amused.

“Are you sure I’m interested?” he asks.

“About going or fucking?”

“Hmm... You’re cute, but I’m not interested in either.”

His answer throws me off.

I stall for a moment as he pivots, ready to leave. I’m already staring at his back when more words fly out of my mouth.

“Ten grand, three days, everything included. Nothing out of pocket. Any fucking, two grand per sex act, whether it involves intercourse or not.”

He turns around slowly, his hand curled around the doorknob, his eyes scanning me, curious.

“Like I said. I’m not hiring you to fuck me, but just in case it happens, that’s the rate,” I say in a softer voice.

He swaggers slowly to me, his eyes dipping me in heat.

I take a step back and hit the mirror.

His hands move to either side of me, his lips coming dangerously close to mine.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” he asks, towering over me.

“Yes,” I murmur.

Slowly, he runs his eyes over me, inspecting my body.

“Mmm... Sincerity. That’s a flavor I like in a woman. So what are you hiring me for...? If not to fuck you?”

My gaze drops to his lips as they curl into a lopsided smile.

Flushed, I flick my gaze up and meet his eyes. I feel them all the way down, inside my core.

“Pretend you’re someone who cares for me.”

“For other people’s eyes.”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you afraid to hire a stranger?”

“No.”

“Why not hire the men you’ve already fucked?”

“That’s not your business,” I toss at him brashly.

His eyebrows shoot up, his eyes flooded with a playful grin.

“Oh... Okay, then. I’ll think about it.”

He pulls away and saunters toward the door. My stomach shrinks.

“I need an answer,” I bark.

He stops and turns to me.

“Now,” I press.

“What’s the rush, baby?”

“The event is next week. ”

He ponders for a moment, his hesitation driving me crazy. And I think he knows. I also think he’s testing me.

“If I say yes, what do you need from me?”

“Your name, clothing size, a clean bill of health, and your sexual preferences.”

His eyes hold mine as I recite my list. Cold. Unemotional. He watches me, his expression guarded, impossible to figure out.

“What’s your name?” I ask softly.

“Jaden. Jaden Taylor. What’s yours?”

“Senna Lloyd.”

“Good, Senna. You have to guess my size...” He pauses and smirks. “My clothing size, that is. I need a clean bill of

health from you as well, and my sexual preferences are not up for discussion. Would that work for you?"

I nod once. He starts moving, and I grab his forearm. My hand melts on his skin.

He looks down as I take in a long breath, my nerve endings grasping the feel of his skin, the warmth of his body, and his muscles' hardness.

"What's No Ash?" I ask.

He grazes his lip with his teeth again. Heat pours over me as I register the slow motion, the unfurling of his bottom lip, and the glistening of his moist flesh.

"It's no ass, no kiss, no bareback."

"And no women."

"Not for money. Usually," he says, his fingers trailing across my knuckles. My body turns into a fluid mess, a swarm of goosebumps crawling up my arm.

"Why's that?" I ask softly as if afraid to end this moment.

"They're trouble."

His hand cuffs my wrist as he peels my fingers away from his arm. He holds my hand for a moment, enough for my heart to flip waywardly a few times, and then breaks away.

"Two o'clock. On Thursday. I'll be in front of Jill's."

My voice follows him as he pushes out the door. I press my hands against my cheeks and shake my head.

I can't believe I'm blushing.



# JADEN

“FOOD IS READY.”

Sara’s voice rings somewhere in the back.

“Don’t wait for me. I already ate. I’ll be out in a second,” she says, her voice traveling from the bathroom to the bedroom and the living room, a soft whimpering following her around.

I take off my boots and walk into the kitchen. A delicious smell greets me.

I retrieve a clean plate from the dishwasher and fill it with food I scoop out from the pots on the stove.

“Somebody’s hungry,” she says, her soft blue eyes glinting with an endearing smile.

She wears a tailored gray dress and heels and studies my face as she nears the fridge.

Her blonde hair almost brushes her shoulders.

She swings the door open and fumbles through the food containers before taking out something. She pulls a drawer open and fishes out an ice cream scoop.

“I made your favorite dessert.”

“Thank you,” I say, finishing the food I had on my plate. “You look good,” I murmur, motioning up and down with my fork. “It makes you look more mature.”

“That’s what I aimed for. Besides, I don’t have anything else to wear. Hopefully, this is good enough for my first interview.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“You’re kind,” she says, smiling.

She places two glass cups of ice cream on the table.

“That looks good,” I say, eyeing the scoops of chocolate and hazelnut ice cream. “Where is she?” I ask.

Sara lifts her chin, motioning to the middle of the living room. Leaning forward, I angle my head and look at her.

“Emma?”

The little girl— with features that resemble mine more than Sara’s—raises her teary eyes to me.

Her soft blonde hair curls at the tips. My eyes slip to her tiny hands busy plucking whiskers out of a cat toy.

“What’s the problem, now?” I ask Sara softly.

“Our favorite bear toy perished in a washer accident,” she says under her breath. “And the cat won’t do it.”

“Oh... That’s a big problem,” I say, shaking my head, amused.

I push the chair back and walk to Emma who’s sitting on a blanket in the middle of the room. Her eyes follow me, curious, as I lower myself to her.

Her small fingers grab my arm.

“What about we play a baby bear game?”

“Baby bear... baby bear,” she singsongs gleefully, clapping.

The cloud of sadness fades, sunshine glinting in her eyes.

My lips curve into a smile, and her eyes brighten even more. She pushes to her little feet, struggling to maintain her balance on her short, wobbly legs.

I help her stand.

“Now, Emma here...” I say, rising to my feet and holding her hand as I step behind her and wink at Sara, “Emma is our baby bear.”

I wrap one arm around her small body, loop the other under her legs and swing her up to me. Crystalline laughter fills the room, and Sara’s eyes glisten with emotion.

I nuzzle the soft skin of Emma’s neck, tickle her belly, and then swing her up in the air a few more times, tears of joy rolling down her pink cheeks.

“Okay. Now, can we have some ice cream?” I ask, sauntering to the kitchen table and sliding into my seat with her on my lap.

Sara pulls the cup away from Emma.

“She’s gonna stick her fingers into it,” she says as I motion to her to leave it on the table.

“That’s okay. You know we’ll eventually use our fingers. Isn’t it so?” I ask, looking at Emma.

She tips her head up to catch my gaze, her fingers poking at my face.

“Good luck with that,” Sara says, chuckling as she pushes out of her chair. “I’ll be back as soon as I finish with the interview. Are you going out tonight?” she asks, concern threading through her voice.

“No, not tonight,” I say in a different voice and press my lips on Emma’s hair. “If mommy comes home early, we’ll catch a movie with baby bear.”

Sara searches my eyes for a moment.

We never talk about my weekend evenings. We’ve been dancing around the subject for some time, and she’s never pressed me. I never volunteered the information either, but I

know she's worried. If nothing else, for my fresh wounds when I come home.

Sometimes.

"That's good," she says, her eyes gleaming with a smile.

As she prepares to pull away, chocolate-smearred fingers attack me in a delicious war.

Stripes of ice cream melt on my face.

"Cool. That's exactly what I needed, baby bear," I say.

Emma laughs.

"I told you she was going to do that," Sara says.

Smiling, she grabs a napkin and cleans Emma's fingers before wiping the chocolate from my chin.

"By the way... I'll be away next week," I say, the words slipping out as I kiss Emma's little fingers.

Sara cuts her eyes at me.

I sense her stare and questioning look, but I evade her gaze.

Instead, I flash a grin at Emma, who's cooing in my arms.

"I'll take two days off from work and leave on Thursday," I say.

"Where?"

Her voice harbors a soft concern.

"Here in Florida. There's nothing to be worried about," I say, grinning again while pushing my chair back and lifting Emma at the same time. "Let's wish mommy 'Good luck!'"

Sara's arms lock around us as Emma giggles, caught between us. To her delight, Sara and I kiss each other's cheeks.

Emma's hands shoot up in the air.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" she says, and we kiss her cheeks.

Her eyes sparkle, filled with joy.

Sara breaks away, struggling to hide her overwhelming emotions. She collects her phone and purse and walks away, waving us goodbye from the doorway.

Emma and I head to the living room as soon as the door shuts.

“What else can I give to my baby bear?” I murmur, checking her toys.

“Story,” she says.

I stop and look at her.

“Story?”

She nods.

“Okay. Story it is. A story about a bear,” I say.

“Princess...” she mumbles.

“All right... We can do a princess.”

Oh, that sounded bad.

I rephrase it for her.

“We can tell a princess story.”

We slide onto the sofa, crayons and a paper pad in her lap, her back propped against my chest.

“Who’s drawing?” I ask.

“Jaden...” she chirps.

“All right. I’m drawing,” I say, picking up a crayon.

Her head leans against my shoulder, her hands reaching for my hair.

“Once upon a time... there was a princess...” I say, drawing the first lines. “She had long chocolate brown hair and hazelnut eyes...”



SENNNA

IT'S ALREADY one o'clock in the afternoon, and my heart beats to tear my ribcage open.

As if wrestling with jitters is not bad enough, panic courses through me as I remember why I'm going where I'm going.

As much as I hate it, I'll have to face my family soon. After nearly five years of silence, that's a scary thought.

I drop my suitcase in my SUV and double-check the garment bags. I packed a few evening gowns and a couple of tuxedos.

A smile tilts my lips as the memory of that man comes to me.

Hmm...

Jaden Taylor.

Hopefully, he'll keep my mind away from things.

It's almost two o'clock in the afternoon when I pull in front of Jill's. It doesn't take long before I start glancing up and down the street, looking for him.

I wish I had his phone number.

Nervous, I check the time again. The thing is, if he doesn't show up, I don't want to go to that event either.

Before I know it, it's thirty minutes past the hour, and I almost pull a muscle craning my neck and surveilling the street, hoping to get a glimpse of him.

As time goes by, it's clear that he won't show up.

Forty-five minutes later, I'm still in the parking lot only because I'm debating with myself whether to eat at Jill's or not before heading home. Pressing my forehead against the steering wheel, I let out a long exhale.

My fucking luck.

I finally straighten up and run my hand through my hair, tossing a glance in the rearview mirror.

Okay. I guess I'll eat something, go home, and forget about this.

A soft knock on the driver's side window makes my heart jump.

I roll the window down.

Hand braced against my car, Jaden peers at me.

I get lost in his stunning blue-gray eyes as I see them in bright light for the first time.

"Yes?" I murmur.

Honestly, I expect him to come up with an excuse. Blame it on a schedule conflict, or something.

Anything.

Apologies would be in order, but that's too much to ask.

"I drive," he says.

"Oh... You're coming?" I sneer.

He flashes a cocky smile, and I regret my choice of words.

"Okay," I say, shooting my hand up in the air. "You decided to join me? Is that better?" I murmur, scooting over and sliding into the passenger's seat.

"Yeah... Whatever works for you," he says, smirking.

He opens the door and throws his duffel bag into the back seat.

The front door slides closed with a muffled sound as he sinks into the driver's seat.

"Hopefully, I won't regret it," he says, adjusting the chair and rearview mirror.

Glancing at him, I meet his gaze.

A shudder falls through me as I drink in his handsome face. I've never met someone with such expressive eyes.

Wisely, I swallow my retort, making a mental note to keep my mouth shut from now on when it comes to him.

“You could’ve shown up on time,” I say.

“I have.”

“That’s not on time.”

“I was here when you pulled up in the parking lot.”

I flick my head to him and search his eyes.

This seems to be the truth.

“Seriously?”

“Uh-huh,” he says, his crooked smile making me hot.

“Why did you make me wait?”

“I wasn’t sure about this thing,” he says.

“Are you kidding me?”

He seems amused.

“I wanted to see how long you were willing to wait for me.”

“What if we had to catch a plane?”

He shoots me an inquiring look.

“I’m just saying,” I say in response to his lifted eyebrow.  
“You’re supposed to take me seriously.”

“I am taking you seriously,” he says calmly and seriously.

I have no idea if these words mean anything to him.

He pulls off his jacket and throws it in the back.

A scar mars his skin next to an intricate, black tattoo that wraps around his arm. His muscles flex, his biceps bulging as his chest tightens beneath his T-shirt.

My eyes drop to his flat abdomen, slowly drifting lower.

He catches me inspecting his body.

Stretching a knowing grin, he rakes his fingers through his hair, combing it all back. Smooth light slides over his features, and I realize how young he looks.



“You said no fucking. Why are you checking me out?” he tosses at me.

I shift my gaze away.

“Habit,” I say, looking out the window.

“Are you horny?”

“I’m not horny,” I say, flicking my eyes at him.

“I think you are,” he says, his gaze slanting to my hard nipples, visible through my T-shirt.

I get warm.

“Are we going or not?” I ask, exasperated.

“Buckle up, sweetheart,” he says as he veers into the traffic.

The first half an hour on the highway is the ride from hell.

He weaves in and out of lanes, pulling away fast, and I’m glad I skipped lunch.

“You know... This is not a motorcycle.”

He gives me a cheeky smile, and I think I got my wish granted. He’ll take my mind off a lot of things.

I can tell he’s a handful, if nothing else, for the emotions flitting through his eyes at a meteoric speed.

“Have you ever been on a long drive?” I ask.

“What do you think?”

“Do you even have a car? I’ve never seen you driving.”

“Of course I do. It’s not exactly mine, and I don’t use it much. I haven’t had a car in a long time.”

That explains a lot.

Admittedly, he’s a good driver. Spot-on reflexes, good judgment, well-calculated risk.

Quite the thrill if you are into roller coasters and like to wear your lunch.

“Can you please slow down?” I ask, eyeing the speedometer.

“You said we’re late.”

“We’ll make it. Don’t worry. Just chill.”

He slows down to a cruising eighty miles per hour, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“How old do you think I am?”

“Well... judging by your behavior...”

He glances at me, his lips drawn into a sexy pout.

“I’d say... You just turned fifteen?”

He chuckles.

“You think you’re cute, huh?”

“Actually, ‘cute’ is not my style,” I say.

“I’m twenty-two,” he murmurs.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You look younger. I mean, now... But you looked older that night...”

My voice trails off.

He glances at me a couple of times, his smile slowly fading.

Sadness glints in his eyes, making them look dull.

Without slowing down, he extends his arm and reaches the back seat.

He grabs his jacket and drags it between us.

“What do you need?” I ask, yanking the jacket out of his hand.

“My cigarettes.”

I slip my hand into the pocket and scoop out the pack and the lighter. I retrieve a cigarette, slide it between my lips, flick the lighter open, and run the flame over the tip.

I take a short drag and exhale.

He gazes at me, his eyes glued to my lips. I lean to his side while he tilts his neck toward me.

I slip the cigarette between his lips, my fingers brushing them in passing.

He shoots his eyes at me. They are intense and stripped of innocence, and I back off swiftly, sexual tension growing in my core.

I bring my knees together and pull away from him.

“How old are you?” he asks in a gravelly voice.

“Guess.”

“I don’t know... Same? Twenty-two?”

“I’m twenty-four. “

He doesn’t say a thing.

“Do I look like I’m twenty-four?” I ask.

He studies me while blowing the smoke to the side.

“No, you don’t. You look younger, but sometimes you feel older,” he says.

“What do you mean I feel older? How does that feel?”

“I can’t describe it... But that’s how it feels.”

I tear my gaze away from him and peer out the window again.

Silence grows between us.

“What happened to you, Senna?” he asks after a while.

I don’t look at him.

I only stare at the beautiful sky.

# S ENNA

IT'S dark when we board the motor yacht.

The evening is unusually warm for this time of year. The ocean is calm, and the breeze is gentle.

We arrive at the resort late. It's late enough I don't have to face or talk to my family tonight.

The staff takes our bags and shows us to our place before leaving us alone.

Torches and candles cast a glow over the footpath leading to the bungalow. The last one in a row of four, the cottage is by far the most private, sitting on the remote end of a strip of beach.

Rose petals draw a path of lovely colors and enticing scent all the way to the stairs and front porch. The hardwood floor creaks as we walk in.

Lit candles wrap the rooms in a soft glow.

A king-size canopy bed, a white couch, and a coffee table paired with espresso-wicker chairs tastefully style the room.

Lounge chairs sit outside close to the ocean.

A table for two is set on the porch while chocolate-covered strawberries, fresh whipped cream, and a chilled bottle of champagne waiting for us in the bedroom.

A tub filled with warm water, rose petals, and bath salts infuse the air with a floral scent.

I glance at Jaden.

He takes in his surroundings, no emotion showing on his face. He's either that good at keeping them concealed. Or he's unimpressed.

I have to admit I'm a bit surprised. I didn't expect to find something so romantic. Although it's an engagement party and all bungalows must come this way, I imagine.

"Right," he murmurs, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I didn't think it would be like this," I say apologetically while running my hand over the satin sheets and brushing the petals off.

"You can take the bed," I say. "I'll sleep on a couch. I'm used to sleeping on them," I add, and then I realize I was talking to myself.

I search the rooms, looking for him but can't find him.

Good thing I locate the shower in the back.

At least we don't have to share the bathtub.

"Jaden?"

I step onto the porch and drag my gaze up and down the strip of sand.

I spot him nearby, standing on the beach, gazing at the ocean. I call his name again, but he doesn't answer, so I spin around and head to the shower.

Moments later, wearing only a white cotton set—shorts and a matching tank top—I stroll to the porch.

Just as I pull out a chair at the table, the bathroom door closes in the back.

Shortly after, I hear the water running.

I lift the food covers and take a peek. Fish and vegetables. Salad.

I take a serving of each and start eating.

Footsteps echo in the house before edging to me.

“I’m sorry... I was hungry,” I say as he takes a seat across from me.

A fresh scent travels from him.

He wears a pair of low-riding sweatpants, barely clinging to his muscular butt. More tattoos than expected cover his torso.

He rests his elbows on the table.

“What’s that?” I ask.

His eyes pull up at me, cold.

“What?”

“What you wear... Your scent.”

“Nothing. Aftershave,” he murmurs, shifting his gaze to the food.

He fills half of his plate and starts eating without much enthusiasm.

Strands of hair fall over his eyes, grazing his cheeks.

I sense a shift in his mood. Not surprisingly, for worse, of course. It’s hard not to notice it. He keeps his eyes rooted to his plate as I roll my gaze over him.

Ropes of corded muscles wrap around his arms. A second tattoo stretches on the left side of his chest. A barely visible scar brands his left arm. There’s a scar next to each tattoo, and he has more scars than I’ve ever seen on anyone I know.

My eyes dip to his strong, long fingers.

He raises his eyes and locks my gaze, annoyed.

“Champagne?” I ask, raising the glass to my lips, trying to distract him.

He shakes his head.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah...”

He's definitely not.

"You don't talk much."

"Do you pay me to talk?" he asks, anger flashing through his voice.

Oh... I see.

This is going to be a problem, and I can't have it right now.

I can't replace him with someone else while I'm on an island, and I only have a few hours.

I proceed with caution, and for starters, I back off, giving him space.

"No... You're right. You don't have to talk to me. You only have to pretend we're a couple when we're in public," I say in a softer voice, without looking at him.

The silence grows awkward.

"I'll go to sleep now," I say after a few more moments, rising to my feet.

He cuffs my wrist and looks up.

"Stay," he says in a different voice—gentler—and something crumbles in my chest.

My body responds to his touch with warmth and tingles.

"I'm sorry," he says as I slide back into my seat.

We sit—both quiet—before he speaks again.

"Who are we supposed to meet tomorrow?" he asks.

"Saturday," I clarify.

He arches an eyebrow, waiting for me to continue.

"My family," I say. "It's my younger sister's engagement party."

"Why do you need a male escort to see your family?"

My eyes pull away from his, my mind coming up with a few ideas, all evading the truth.

I look at him again.

“We severed ties a few years back.”

“When exactly?”

“Five years ago.”

“Long time... “ he says, playing with the lighter. “What happened?”

“Um... Family shit.”

“Why do you need a man with you?”

“I’m not sure...” I say, lying. “But it was either that or not showing up.”

He moves his lips with discontentment.

He’s not buying my shit.

“Why do you have to pay men to keep you company, Senna? You’re a beautiful woman,” he says.

The last words sounded like a statement, not an argument.

He squares his shoulders and tilts his head back, giving me his signature stare. He looks down at me while sliding a cigarette between his lips.

“I am?”

My voice comes strangled, my cheeks warm with a blush.

He nods slowly, and a pull tightens in my abdomen.

Holding my gaze, he lowers his head and lights a cigarette.

I barely draw a breath.

“But you know that...” he says, a slow smile stretching across his lips as he talks around his cigarette. “So why do you have to pay them?” he asks before blowing the smoke to the side.

“I don’t have to pay them, but it’s easier that way.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“Money is not my problem.”

“Then, what is your problem?” he asks, leaning forward again, resting his elbows on the table.



Dips form on his muscular shoulders. His gaze spurs more fire across my skin.

My fingers tremble while a shiver sweeps my back. I hide my hands in my lap.

He pulls back a little.

“That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me,” he says and takes another drag.

I watch the orange tip of the cigarette grow brighter for a moment, and his arched lips release the smoke.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me more about you,” I say.

He leans back against his chair and rakes his fingers through his hair. His muscles shift beneath his skin.

A mysterious smile brightens his face as he briefly glances at the ocean.

“Okay... Ask,” he says, shifting his focus back to me.

“Why do you have to do what you do? You could do something else for money.”

“And you could be married, have kids, and not hire men for sex,” he retorts, his glare coming fast at me.

His words feel like ice against my face, freezing my bones.

“You’re right,” I say conciliatory. “I’m not the one to pass judgment.”

“I’m doing something else for money, and it’s not enough,” he says, a flash of anger flitting through his eyes. “Next,” he says and takes a long drag this time.

“Why men?” I ask.

“Because they want it and also pay for it. Women are not interested in paying for sex. They look for something else. Exceptions aside, of course...” he says, a smile tilting his lips.

A weight lifts off my chest as his mood shifts for the better this time.

“You’ve never fucked women for money?” I ask incredulously.

A secret grin lights up his eyes.

“I used to, but they’ve created too many problems for me.”

“Such as?”

“The husband or boyfriend usually hired me for a straight fuck— with him watching—or a threesome. Sooner or later, their jealousy was part of the mix. When women hired me, they’d often become attached. Develop feelings. They thought they were looking for sex when in fact, they wanted romance. I don’t do romance.”

I quietly sigh while stifling a smile.

“Why are you so relieved?” he asks.

“Um... nothing... It makes sense...”

“What?”

“Not doing romance...”

Shaking his head, he chuckles and then tips his chin, motioning to the bedroom.

“I can eat strawberries, sleep on a bed of roses, and drink champagne, but I can’t romance a woman for money. I just can’t.”

“Cool,” I say in a clipped voice.

“Why are you so happy about it?”

“No reason,” I say, grinning.

“You’re a strange woman.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I fucking bet.”

He flicks the cigarette with his tongue, drawing my eyes to his mouth again, then pulls it out and runs the tip of his tongue over his lip.

His lopsided smile throws me into a pool of heat.

Nervously, I shift my focus to my hands before studying his fingers.

“Do you like it?” I ask quietly.

“What?”

I glance at him as he tips his head to catch my gaze.

For a moment, we get lost in each other’s eyes.

“Men blowing you.”

Anger brews in his eyes, but it fades fast.

He whips his head to the side and looks at the ocean, a muscle pulsing in his jaw.

He brings the cigarette to his lips, pondering.

“I don’t think about the other person... Whether it’s a man or a woman. No one who has sex for money does. I don’t think so. Sometimes not even those who don’t fuck for money do.”

He swings his gaze back, his lips pulled into a soft smile.

“Maybe the men you’re paying think about you,” he says.

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re hot. And you’re probably not looking for romance, or you wouldn’t pay for it. You can get a plight of men to romance you.”

He tucks his cigarette at the corner of his lips, his chest rising as he inhales, and then cocks his head to the side and narrows his eyes, examining me.

Unhurriedly, he ashes his cigarette, the corners of his mouth lifting into a slow, knowing smile.

I watch him, spellbound.

“I imagine you’re after something different than most women. Something that men crave to give away for free. Something that naturally boils in their blood. In some men, anyway. So yeah... I’m sure they think about you when they fuck you.”

Rivulets of sweat roll down my neck as warmth drapes over my shoulders and pleasure pulses between my legs.

“How do you get hard then?” I ask.

“I know how to turn myself on regardless of the circumstances or the partner.”

He studies my face.

“Does this satisfy your curiosity?” he asks abruptly but softens his words with a smile.

I nod.

He stays silent.

“What about you?” he asks.

“What about me?”

“If you don’t need romance, what gets you off?”

Evading his eyes, I stare at the ocean and smile.



ROSES FILL the room with their fresh sweet aroma.

I must’ve slept for a few good hours, yet it’s still dark outside. I push to my elbows and check his bed through the open door.

The floor creaks.

I sit upright, pull the curtain to the side, and look out the window. The morning light barely tears apart the remnants of the night while he saunters to the ocean.

He sheds his sweatpants, giving me a perfect view of his naked body—muscular torso, thighs, and teasingly curved butt—before diving into the water.

I stare out the window for a few good moments, waiting for him to return.

Half an hour later, he’s nowhere in sight.

I crash into the pillow and fall asleep.

Crying seagulls wake me a few hours later, with the bright morning light dancing on my eyelids.

Eyes heavy with sleep, I slide off the couch and shuffle to the bathroom.

I shower and spend some time in front of the mirror, brushing my hair and teeth and putting on light makeup before slipping into a short, gauzy dress with embroidered bell sleeves and flared bottom.

Sandals in hand, I tiptoe across the bedroom, heading for the exit.

Walking across the bedroom and past his bed, I glance at him. My breath catches, and my mouth falls open as I get a glimpse of him.

I turn to stone.

He is sprawled on his stomach, naked, still sleeping, with a rumpled sheet barely covering his thighs.

His left knee is exposed, and the swell of his ass is on full display, perfectly curved and hard and muscular.

And I was right. It has that teasing curvature that makes my imagination flare.

I stare and pivot slightly, quietly bending over him to see more. Soft, steady breaths roll off his lips.

My eyes roam over his body one more time before I take another step, and the hardwood floor creaks under my feet.

Damn it.

My pulse explodes in my neck.

He rolls from one side onto the other, the sheet sliding off.

I take a long, silent breath while staring at his naked rear, muscular thighs, and morning erection peeking from under him.

Reluctantly, I pull my gaze away, slowly sliding toward the door.

“What are you doing?”

His hoarse, morning voice rolls in my ears, followed by the soft rustle of the sheet as he pulls it over his body.

I flick my gaze at him.

Propped on his elbow, the sheet covering him from the waist down, he palms his hard cock, now twitching beneath the silky fabric.

He looks at me, eyes foggy with sleep.

“What time is it?” he asks.

“It’s ten,” I say, slipping into my sandals.

“Do I need to go somewhere?”

“Not today. Unless you want to join the girls and me.”

He shakes his head.

“No. Were you watching me?” he asks, a cocky smile rolling to his lips.

His bedroom eyes rove over my legs.

“No, I did not. Isn’t it a bit too early for this?” I ask, sneering at his smirk.

Straightening my back, I look for a dignifying exit. Still, I can’t help myself and glance at him over my shoulder.

One last time.

My gaze dips. He tears his hand away from his groin so that I have a full representation of his hard shaft tenting the sheet.

His smirk gets on my nerves.

“I’m leaving now,” I say.

“Go,” he says softly while grabbing the root of his cock with one hand and brushing the crown through the soft fabric with the other.

I do a double-take. He’s well endowed.

He also follows the direction of my gaze, amused.

“What’s holding you back, baby?” he asks softly.

I raise my eyes.

He’s playing with me, testing me, and having so much fun.

“Breakfast is ready if you want to eat,” I say dryly.

“What about you?”

“I don’t eat breakfast,” I say, walking around the bed.

He moves up against the pillow and lets the sheet slide lower. On cue, my eyes drop to his groin again, his hard-on stirring against the satin sheet again.

Folding his arms beneath his neck, he observes me while stretching his torso and offering me a perfect view of his pecs, shredded abs, and the impressive bulge between his legs.

His eyes burn through mine, his lips flashing a tantalizing smile.

“Are you fucking with me?” I snap.

He laughs.

“Only if you want me to fuck you... Excuse me. To fuck with you, sweetheart.”

I grab a pillow from the floor and throw it at him. He ducks his head and catches it, laughing like an ass.

“It’s not like I haven’t seen a cock before.”

“Why do you stare, then?”

“I don’t stare,” I say, my eyes falling to his cock again.

“You just did.”

“You’re driving me crazy.”

“You ogled my ass last night when I went for a swim.”

“How do you know that?”

“I saw you at the window.”

“Whatever... I was worried about you,” I say. “Swimming into the ocean at night for like what...? An hour?”

“I’m a good swimmer. You couldn’t have dragged me out of the water even if you wanted to,” he says, rolling his eyes over my body.

“I’ll keep that in mind next time,” I mumble, annoyed.

“Good luck... with your family.”

I wave him off and pull away, his words sobering me up.

My smile drops, and my stomach clenches as I climb the stairs and walk out of the house.



# S ENNA

“SENNA?”

“Isabel!”

My sister’s arms loop around me, her eyes twinkling with a smile. She was only fourteen when I left, and at the time, she couldn’t quite grasp what had happened, so it wasn’t easy to forget about me.

Regardless, she had to abide by the family rules, and we haven’t kept in touch for years.

“I’m so happy you are here. I was afraid you wouldn’t come. I didn’t see you last night.”

“That’s because we arrived late.”

“We? Where is the mysterious man?”

I hesitate for a moment.

Her expression shifts quickly.

“Is it a woman?” she asks, a bit intrigued.

“No, no. It’s a man. He’s, um... I think he’s at the beach. He’s probably swimming right now,” I say, giving her a small smile. “You’ll see him tonight.”

“Okay.”

She steps back and runs her eyes over me.

“You look... different.”

“Good or bad?”

“Good. I wish I’d looked more like you.”

“No, you don’t,” I say, chuckling.

A natural blonde with hazel eyes, slender and feminine, she looks like a princess. And chances are she’ll be one once she marries Lester Crown, one of the wealthiest men in Wyoming.

She runs her fingers over my arm.

“No, no, seriously. I’d like to be as fit as you are. You go to the gym, I imagine.”

I give her a swift once-over.

She wears a tailored, floral dress, which hugs her girlish figure and makes her look like a fashion model.

“I do, but mostly to keep my head straight.”

She laughs, a melodious sound falling from her lips.

“It does a lot of good to your body, too,” she says.

“I guess... Where is Evelyne?” I ask, my lips suddenly dry.

“They’ll fly in tomorrow. Mom and dad arrive tonight. Adele and Mark are here. Nick will be here early afternoon. I think... There are a lot of other people, but no one you know.”

“Where is Lester?”

“He’s not here. We expect him tomorrow afternoon. Business matters,” she says charmingly.

I take her in for a moment.

She sure turned out to be how my mom wanted all her girls to be. Poised and delicate at the exterior, yet showing inner strength when dealing with family affairs.

Evelyne, my older sister, is not far from the family mold either. Married to one of the most successful surgeons on Long

Island, New York, a physician herself, she's a classy woman and, undoubtedly, a go-getter.

"Let's take a seat at the table," she says, nudging me to the terrace.

I spend the next couple of hours with Isabel and her friends, talking about the party, fashion trends, and the gorgeous, sunny weather.

Early afternoon, they sit at the bar inside, and I stroll back to the bungalow.

The air is warm and dry, perfect for lounging on the beach.

I climb the stairs, walk inside, and glance around. The place is empty. I peer outside, scanning the porch and the beach.

Jaden is nowhere in sight.

I kick off my shoes and peel off my dress. Wearing only a G-string and a matching low-cut bra, I head to the shower.

As I saunter to the bathroom, the faint sound of the TV slips through a cracked door. I tiptoe to the back room and quietly push it open, praying it doesn't creak like everything else in this house.

He's here.

I zoom in on Jaden's bare shoulder while craning my neck to get a full view of him.

He has one arm folded under his head, the other stretched along his body, his hand moving rhythmically.

I gasp.

Is he doing what I think he's doing?

I lean forward.

Eyes closed, back lining a pillow, legs slightly parted, he raises one knee, his fingers sliding up and down his hard-on, his fist rubbing the chiseled crown.

My heart stops and then races, furiously pumping blood. I swallow a few times and lick my lips.

Pleasure rolls over his face, the long, sensual, twisting moves making his hips rock slightly.

I get warm and wet between my legs.

He thrusts his cock into his fist while I stare and clench my thighs.

Breathing heavily, he moans, his soft, nasal sounds electrifying my skin.

His hips jerk harder, every bit of motion echoing in my core.

His cock slides faster while I grip the doorknob with bloodless fingers.

With every stroke, he arches his body, his muscles shifting beneath his inked skin. I bite my lip, pressing my thighs together and relishing the wetness in my panties.

“You know... You could join me,” he rasps.

My heart leaps to my throat.

He flicks his eyes open and runs a lustful gaze over me while slowly taking me in.

Lost for words, I gape at him.

“Suit yourself,” he says after a moment, closing his eyes again.

He slips back into his world, his hand caressing his shaft, my body reacting to his moves and pleasure.

He’s edging—I can tell.

Hand glued to the door, I hold my breath, indulging in every moment of his pleasure.

My eyes peel wide as he tips his hips and shoots his load, the warm, creamy fluid spilling down his abs.

I rush away, throbbing between my legs, and storm into the shower before turning on the water.

I don’t know what scares me the most.

The fact that I suddenly get turned on so easily or that it has to do with him.

My hands and knees quiver, my panties soaked.

This is gonna be a fucking mess.



I TAKE off my dress and toss it to the side.

For fuck's sake, it's only dinner.

I walk back to the closet, sift through the hangers and retrieve another dress. A sleeveless, knee-length, black dress with a low plunging neckline.

It screams anything but island fashion, but I can't be bothered with it right now. I pull the dress on and twirl in front of the mirror.

Reaching back, I try to close the zipper.

A warm hand slides on top of mine.

"I'll do it," he says.

I melt from the waist down.

First, he sweeps all my hair over one shoulder, and then he smoothly pulls the zipper up. Silently, he tips his gaze down while I observe him in the mirror.

Decked out in tailored black pants and a matching slim-fit shirt with an open neckline and its crisp fabric falling perfectly over his athletic body, he makes my temperature spike.

"How does it look?" I ask, waiting for his eyes to meet mine in the mirror.

"It looks good," he says before looking at my rear.

"I mean my dress."

He glances at me, smirking.

"Your dress looks good too."

Slowly I turn around, finding myself inches away from him.

He doesn't move while I draw still, unable to say a word or step away from him.

His body heat rolls over me, and the scent of his cologne and masculinity enter my lungs.

Holding my gaze, he slides his hands into his pockets and silently observes me. His smile fades, his expression gradually shifting.

A hard edge flickers through his gaze while he studies me with fresh eyes. It's a dense, sexual stare, a reminder of who he is.

It dawns on me I don't know much about him, and he is not just any man I can toy with.

"We need to go," I say, my voice shaking.

"Why are you nervous?" he asks.

"Parents... family," I say, evading his eyes, my nerves becoming even more evident.

"Let's go," I say, anxiously sliding my hand over his chest, nudging him to move.

He doesn't budge.

I flick my gaze up and meet his eyes.

Stripped of warmth and softness, they seem carved in blocks of ice.

"Jaden?"

Without displaying the slightest emotion, he erases the small gap between us while I pull back, hitting the wall.

My mouth falls open with surprise.

"What are you doing?" I mutter, my pulse pounding fast in my neck.

Silence meets my question, fueling my panic.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Jaden?” I bark, the fear sobering me up.

I try to push him away without success.

Smoothly, he curls his hand around my neck, his lips coming closer to my ear.

“You know exactly what I’m doing,” he says, a shudder going through my bones.

His palms slide onto the wall as he cages me with his frame and his hips, making me sweat.

A gasp falls from my lips as I feel his hard cock against me.

“Is this what you are looking for?” he mutters in my hair, his voice vibrating through my skin.

I try to push him away again, my effort not very convincing, yet still part of the game.

Without the slightest hesitation, he slams his body into mine.

And I fight him. Oh, yes, I do.

I need him all stirred up and angry as I surrender to his power. I need the desperation flowing through my veins to wash away my guilt.

I need to feel as if there was no other choice to feed the blazing fire in my blood and get turned on.

The more I fight him, the hotter I get and the closer to submitting.

Harshly, he grabs my hair and tips my face up, grinding into me. Despite the fabric, I intimately feel him.

I gasp and groan and sink my nails into his back.

His lips curve into a twisted grin.

“I’ll give you what you want,” he says, his voice vibrating over my lips.

I push against him, and he slams back into me, crushing my chest with his torso while wedging his thigh between my

legs.

“Jaden...”

My voice starts fraying.

He pulls my hair back, forcing me to arch my neck, and slowly runs his tongue over my skin.

I moan, yearning to feel him inside me. He rolls his hips, rubbing his hard meat against me.

“Don’t do that,” I say, desperate to feel some relief.

His force comes to me, hurting me yet spurring so much pleasure. My scalp hurts, and my skin stings, and I want him to do it.

He flicks his tongue up my neck, sending pleasure to my sex.

I moan quietly.

“The night you saw me...” he rasps, riding my dress up and running his hand between my thighs.

“Uh-huh,” I mumble, losing it fast.

“Is that why you’d followed me? For this?”

With one flick of a hand, he rips my panties off.

I gasp, his hand flying to my mouth fast.

I jolt against him, my bare flesh against his hand, his eyes burning into mine.

“That’s what it was, wasn’t it?” he mutters, a dark smile curving his lips as I push my body against his.

He keeps me in place with his weight, raising a firestorm inside me.

“You like it, don’t you?” he says, his hand still over my mouth.

His eyes dive into mine like he enters my soul.

I close my eyes briefly in response.

“You’ve longed for it, haven’t you?”



I sag in his arms, giving him the answer when his fingers enter me, his lips trailing my neck.

His fingers go deep, his teeth sinking into my flesh even deeper.

It hurts even more when he sucks on my branded skin.

And all that makes me pulse around his fingers.

“Mm-hmm...” he murmurs before biting my shoulder.

My nipples harden.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” he says, trailing my slit with his thumb while curling his fingers and pushing them inside me.

I growl against his palm, heading to a cosmic blast.

Clawing at his back and butt, I push myself against his fingers, offering my neck, despite the smell of blood coming from his previous bite.

His lips trail another path along my jawline and tingles swirl down all the way to my tailbone. I squirm and moan, clutching his hips.

He peels his hand away from my face and lowers his mouth to mine.

“You can’t fucking wait, can you? Good. Me neither...” he says. “See, it’s not that hard, babe. You just have to get the right man,” he mutters, a sinister smile tugging at his lips.

He’s good.

I have to hand it to him.

He’s damn good.

He breaks away from me, leaving me a heap of heat.

Smoothly, he unfastens his belt and pulls it out. He locks my wrists, ties them behind me, and kicks a chair under my butt.

Without a shred of emotion on his face, he runs his hands up my skirt, rolling it to my waist.

His gaze lingers on my clean-shaven folds.

He kicks my legs apart, and cold air licks my heated flesh. I fuss in my seat when he grabs my hair and bends over.

“You stay still, or I’ll fuck you up.”

My hair bristles.

He straightens, a dark, lustful smile tugging at his lips. The line between play and reality quickly blurs.

Holding my gaze, he works his fly open and lets his cock spring free.

His shaft makes my center clench by showing a perfect girth and length and bouncing, heavy in his fist.

Round, tight balls match his prize-winning cock.

He wraps his hand around it and teasingly starts to stroke it.

I flick my gaze up.

The most annoying, cocky grin spreads across his lips.

Irritated, I rattle the chair and try to pull my thighs together.

“Don’t do that,” he says, observing the swollen flesh between my thighs.

Eyes rooted to my slit, he runs his tongue over his lip. The image sears my brain.

Widening his stance, he plants his feet on either side of me and brings his shaft to my mouth.

He threads his fingers through my hair and wraps my locks around his wrist.

His rock-hard crown touches my lips, the scent of his arousal rolling into my lungs.

Moving my tongue, I sweep the hot, smooth, chiseled head.

He pulls away from me, his hand still in my hair, and grins, perversely amused.

“You want it?” he asks.

I glare at him.

“How badly do you want it?”

I grit my teeth and try to pull my hair out of his hand. It hurts, and he doesn't want to let go of me, chuckling softly.

“Open your fucking mouth,” he rumbles as he finally lets his cock move back to my lips.

I open my mouth. He slides his shaft in, and I roll my tongue over him, famished.

“That's fucking good,” he says as I start bobbing my head.

He thrusts in, and I take him deeper, sucking on him and wishing my hands were free to stroke him.

He hits the back of my throat repeatedly, but I control my gag reflex.

“That's unexpectedly good,” he says, a smile threading through his voice.

He frames my face and rolls his hips.

I look up.

Tipping his head back, he observes me with half-closed eyes. Craning and arching my neck, I take him in as much as I can.

For minutes, he fucks my mouth—solely to his liking. And the less attention he's paying to me, the more determined I am to make him come.

As he scales up, my throbbing only quickens.

I moan around his cock, his eyes flicking open as he picks up the pace, holds my head with both hands, and starts fucking me without restraint. His shaft hardens even more before his cum hits my throat, dripping over my taste buds, the spike of pleasure becoming unstoppable.

I rattle the chair, on the cusp of coming.

He pulls out of my mouth, one hand wrapped around his shaft, the other reaching behind me and untying me.

Rushed, I slip my fingers between my legs and let the orgasm fall through me. A jolt goes through me, and then another one, pleasure lapping at my sex.

I moan and shake and arch my body, not caring that he consumes me with fiery eyes.

It takes moments before I finally calm down. Slumped in the chair, I barely breathe.

“Fuck...” I mutter, sweat lining my neck, my hair damp and entangled.

Drops of cum still trickle on my dress when his zipper goes up.

I look down, still heaving, and I’m washed with surprise when he snakes his arm around me and pulls me up.

Wobbly on my feet, I lean on him, welcoming his arm around my waist and his hand in my hair.

His thumb brushes my lip, sweeping away cum.

His eyes hold mine as he licks his finger, a secret smile coloring his gaze.

“You’re good,” I say softly.

His grin turns warmer, lighting up his eyes.

“And you’re a rare kind of woman...” he says, leaning into me.

His lips brush over mine briefly before he places a feather-like kiss on my cheek.

Spellbound, I watch him pull away, a flutter moving through my chest.



“SO, WHAT’S MY NAME?” he asks.

“You are who you are.”

“What’s my occupation?”

“You’re a writer.”

He breathes out a soft laugh.

“You like it?” I ask.

“Sounds good. What’s your occupation?”

“Editor.”

“Editor?”

“Yeah... It’s something boring that people never care about.”

“What exactly do you do?” he asks seriously this time.

He pulls to a short stop in the middle of the petal-covered footpath, his eyes searching mine.

“Other than hiring men for rough sex, what exactly do you do?” he says, not adjusting the volume of his voice.

The amused twinkle in his eye gives him away.

“Shut up,” I say under my breath.

Packed with guests, the dinner table is not far from us.

Laughter rocks his chest again. I can’t help but grin.

Pulling closer to him, I finger his chest.

“Don’t you dare to pull a joke like this on me in front of these people,” I say, still smiling. “I’m a fucking editor, but what I really do is make money. They don’t need to know how or how much.”

His fingers travel to my face before lightly running across my cheekbone, his eyes gleaming with a smile.

“You can’t even call them family.”

“No, I can’t. I no longer consider them my family.”

He suddenly wraps his arms around me and pulls me into a hug, glancing over my shoulder at the same time.

“What are you doing?” I ask quietly.

“They’re looking at us. I thought we should play our roles,” he murmurs in my ear.

My skin gets scorchingly hot from his touch.

“Who’s they?” I ask in a quivering voice.

“For one... The women. They all look at us. And then, there’s an older couple. Those two people are glaring at us. I imagine they are your parents, and then...”

He pauses.

“Yes?”

“There’s a man who can’t take his eyes off you. My competition, I suspect,” he says, entertained.

“What’s so amusing?”

“He has no fucking idea who you really are,” he says, tearing away.

His expression changes again, and I brace myself.

“We need to go. Ready, darling?” he asks in a different voice as he dials into his character.

He takes my hand and walks me toward the table.

“Oh, by the way...”

He stops again, and I almost break a heel, swaying as I come to a swift halt.

“Where did we meet?” he asks.

“A bar. We’re both avid readers and love motorcycles,” I say, pulling the answer out of my ass.

“Are we?” he asks, smiling pleasantly surprised.

# S ENNA

THANK GOD, it's a public place with a lot of guests and plenty of spots to hide.

The first hour, I struggle a lot.

I drink more than I normally would, just to be able to socialize, face Nick's questions, and pretend I'm not bothered by the success Jaden's having with the ladies.

My father rolls his gaze over me as if I'm nothing, while my mother is still keen to give me a piece of her mind after all these years.

It doesn't surprise me that she takes a jab at Jaden.

No, no. Of course, not.

As expected, she decries my lack of common sense and berates me for hooking up with a writer.

Luckily, after a few more hours of torment, the party draws to an end. Nick gives me a good night kiss and pulls away.

Minutes later, I scan the groups of people, searching for Jaden.

I spot him not far from me, a beautiful blonde wrapped around him like a python. His hand rests on the small of her back, almost touching her ass as she submissively tips her face up and flashes a smile, offering a sample of her cleavage.

Something rubs me the wrong way.

I empty another glass of wine before tottering on the rug of petals to the bungalow. I need a shower and some time alone to clear my head.

I shed my dress, remove my heels, and abandon them in the bedroom before strolling to the bathroom.

Moments later, I walk out, glance at the couch, and crash into the bed, butt naked.

Sprawled on my stomach, I fall asleep.

Hours later, a scent of smoke and flowers tickles my nostrils, a soft breeze rolling over my body.

Eyes closed, I run my hand over the sheets.

He's not here.

He's probably in one of the bungalows, fucking that woman.

To hell with him.

I shouldn't care. Why would I care? I never gave a fuck about men fucking other women.

I never had to give a fuck. That's the beauty of it all. Once you lose everything, you lose it all.

The good and the bad.

I lost my innocence and almost lost my mind. And I definitely lost my family. That would've happened anyway, I suspect. The family. Yeah... That was bound to happen.

The good thing is, I've been numbed for so long that I never had to care for another human being ever again.

So why the hell would I care now?

More smoke wafts through the air, prompting me to flip my eyes open.

"What the fuck?" I murmur, bolting upright.

Fumbling around, I search for a sheet to cover myself.



Sitting in a chair, his ankle on top of his knee, he quietly observes me while bringing a cigarette to his lips.

A sly smile narrows his eyes as he slowly takes a drag.

My gaze dips to his bare chest before going to the crumpled sheet on his lap. His jeans hardly cover his crotch.

I flick my eyes up.

Holding my gaze, he tips his chin up, breathes out a soft stream of smoke, and lets the sheet drop to the floor, his eyes glinting with mischief.

He's such a piece of work.

Well, two can play this game, so I get my legs under me, lean forward, and part my thighs, propping myself on my hands.

His eyes roll down, sweeping my chest before lingering on my sex.

He purses his lips, slowly bringing his cigarette back to his mouth. Smiling around it, he teasingly runs his hand up his cock.

The game is on.

Without tearing my gaze away from him, I tilt my head back and arch my spine.

I raise my arms and comb my fingers through my hair, pushing my breasts forward.

His gaze drifts over me, from my lips to my breasts and the spot between my legs.

Smirking and cocking his head to the side, he puts his cigarette between his lips again and casually takes another drag.

Lips curled into a wolfish grin, he blows the smoke up.

“You're more beautiful than I imagined,” he says, his words wrapped in a smoky tone.

I feel pleasure before I suddenly remember.

Wait a minute.

My head resumes its natural position when I clasp my hips.

“Where were you?” I ask in a stern voice, the magic of the moment shattered.

His eyebrows shoot up, his eyes flashing amusement and disbelief.

“Where was I?”

“Yeah. Where were you? Were you with that woman?”

He chuckles, entertained.

“Are you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous,” I say, annoyed. “Seriously... Where were you?”

“On the beach.”

“Fucking?”

His palms shoot up in the air.

I just gave him another reason to grin from ear to ear.

“Why do you care?” he asks.

“I don’t care... I just wanted to know where you were.”

I slip off the bed and strut to him. He runs his eyes over me as I stand naked in front of him.

“You’re a fine piece of ass, Senna.”

“And you’re such a gentleman,” I say, turning my back to him.

“I am. I gave you some space...” he says, his voice echoing behind me.

I pivot to him, and his gaze drops below my waist, his legs pulling open while his hand brushes the bulge pushing against his pants.

“What do you mean?” I ask, having a hard time focusing.

He raises his eyes from my slit, a playful smile arching his lips.

“You and your boyfriend,” he says.

“What boyfriend?” I blurt.

He winks at me and flashes a knowing smile.

“He is not my boyfriend.”

“Then why did you fuck him?” he asks.

Surprisingly, I notice an edge to his voice.

“I didn’t... What the hell? I don’t need to tell you anything,” I bark, looking for a robe when two strong arms coming from behind whip around me and pull my back into his chest.

I writhe against him.

He locks me even harder.

“Let me go,” I say.

“I’m not, and you know it,” he says, no longer amused, or smiling, a dark, raw edge spearing through his voice.

He tosses me on the bed, his weight sliding on top of me.

It all happens so fast that I don’t have time to fight back.

He grabs my wrists, pulls them above my head, and straddles my chest.

Long strips of fabric snake around my wrist before tying me to the bed posts.

He slides off while I start kicking my legs.

Unfazed, he grabs them one by one and ties them to the posts as well, spreading them open.

He jumps off the bed and runs a hand through his hair, taking me in for a mere second.

Butt naked, legs open, squirming like a mad woman, my eyes spitting fire.

Smiling, he takes a step back and pivots toward the door.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” I thunder as he turns his back to me, heading to the exit.

“I’m going fucking,” he says defiantly.

“Don’t you fucking dare. Jaden? Jaden fucking Taylor! Are you crazy?”

The old stairs whimper under his feet, my questions echoing in the air, unanswered.

“Jaden!!” I shout again, oblivious to the fact that someone other than him might actually hear me and come check on me.

Several minutes pass.

I wiggle my fingers and try to grab the ends of the ties. They’re tucked in, so I can’t reach them.

I jerk my wrists, trying to loosen them. No such luck.

I attempt to pull my legs out, and my muscles get sore from trying.

Eventually, I give up and whip my head to the side, my eyes going to the clock.

A full hour ticks by before heavy footsteps trail to the bungalow, and someone enters the cottage through the back door.

I truly hope it’s him.

“Jaden?”

The floor squeaks again, near me this time, startling me.

A knife slips onto the nightstand, the metallic sound sending chills to my bones. I run my eyes over him.

He wears the same jeans, a strand of fabric wrapped around his hand.

He turns his back to me.

Again.

“Jaden? That’s not how you’re supposed to—”

“I do whatever the hell I want.”

He sounds angry, seriously angry, prompting me to tug at my ties again.

He pivots to me, his eyes throwing daggers.

“Stay still, Senna.”

“That’s not... Let me go. For fuck’s sake, Jaden. Don’t make me scream.”

He bends over and wraps his hand around my neck, pinning me to the mattress. His beautiful face is only inches away from me, yet all I see is darkness.

“Scream all the fuck you want,” he says in a low voice, barely containing his fury. “I don’t care. I can’t wait to enjoy the spectacle. Respectable physician’s daughter found tied to the bed with her legs spread and her pussy wet while she waited to be roughed up.”

His words scream at me, stirring pain and anger in my heart.

“You fucking asshole.”

He clasps my jaw, his eyes pulling into a straight line.

“Watch your fucking words, or I’ll have you gagged,” he growls through clenched teeth.

His knees slide on either side of me, my body crushed under his weight. The glint of a blade catches my eye before the tip of the knife brushes strands of hair away from my face and traces the side of my neck, with scary precision pressing on my carotid.

My pulse splits beneath the metal.

I freeze.

“Jaden?” I call him softly.

My voice falters while I search his eyes. He’s as dark as they come and this no longer feels like a game.

Fear runs through my blood.

“Why are you looking for trouble?” he asks.

“I’m not.”

“I think you do,” he says.

“I don’t want to.”

“Then why?”

A few moments of silence slip away before a curtain of tears veils my eyes.

“I don’t have an answer,” I say in a strangled voice.

He studies me for a second before finally moving the blade away.

I breathe out a sigh of relief.

“Is that good enough for you?” he asks.

I nod fast.

A couple of times.

“Does it turn you on?”

I shake my head from side to side.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know where you stop.”

“Or if I stop,” he mutters.

“Yes...”

My voice trails off.

He slides the knife back onto the nightstand, dismounts me, and lets his jeans fall to the floor. My gaze roams over his groin as he wraps his fist around his hard-on.

He climbs on the bed and straddles my chest again, his upwardly curved cock jutting into the air, inches away from my mouth.

He pushes a pillow under my head.

“You’re fucked up,” I mumble, shifting under him.

“And it seemingly works,” he says, a faint smile creeping up his face.

I search his eyes for a moment.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, baby,” he adds.

“Don’t you fucking ‘baby me’,” I retort, regaining my composure. “I don’t need to suck your dick after you fucked someone else.”

His smile drops from his lips in a split second, so fast I don’t even have time to regret my words, before his hand wraps around my neck again, and he leans closer to me.

His jaw tenses, his eyes turning dark.

“Let me make something clear to you. You don’t get to tell me what to do,” he rumbles, pissed, and I have no idea whether he’s acting or not.

He pulls upright and strokes his cock while tightening his grip on my neck.

The more he does it, the more heat swirls between my legs.

My lips part.

He throws me a quick glance and shifts his position just as I feel my core throbbing.

He moves closer to my mouth, sweeps the tip of his cock with his thumb, and slides it right between my lips.

A bead of pre-cum breaks and spreads over my taste buds, turning me on so badly. My lips close around his thumb as my tongue begins to swirl around it.

I start sucking on it, relishing the heat in my core.

“I didn’t fuck anyone,” he finally says in a softer voice,

My ears perk up as I’m still unsure whether he actually said it.

Smoothly, he removes his thumb from my lips and slides his cock into my mouth. My eyes water as he hits my throat.

He tucks the second pillow behind my back, lifting my head, and reaches above me to cut my restraints.

I bring my hands to him, eager to touch him.

His hands rest on the headboard as he finally grants me some control. I run my fingers over his hardness, anxious to feel his shaft.

I stroke him with my hand and wrap my lips around his flesh, my mouth watering.

Sensually, he rolls his hips.

He pulls away, and I slip my hand between my legs.

Swiftly, he grabs my wrists and pulls my hands above my head.

“No touching. Okay?”

I nod.

He peels his hands away from mine and slides down, his hot breath trailing my folds. His fingers gently part my nether lips, his mouth connecting with my throbbing flesh.

Oh... Damn it.

He presses his mouth against me, tongue kissing and licking my clit, setting a quake between my thighs.

“Jaden...” I murmur, gasping with pleasure.

He smoothly slides his fingers into me while sucking on my clit.

Coordinating his movements, he hits every spot of throbbing pleasure with maximum precision.

I arch and press myself against his mouth, wet from my arousal. My hands slip into his hair as more pleasure flares through me.

I close my eyes, indulging.

He takes me right to the peak, and I stay high for a few good moments, arching, shaking, moaning, and groaning, my sensitive flesh pulsing incessantly.

Slowly, I scale down, whimpering and clenching my thighs.

He pulls up and props himself on his arms, a smile tugging at his lips.

Swiftly, he sets himself between my legs, his rock-hard cock pushing against my hot, wet entrance.



He brings his lips closer to mine while filling me to the brim.

A crying moan breaks away from my lips.

“Shh...” he says, his fingers coming to my face.

He keeps moving, entering me with paced motions that let me feel him all the way.

I start to tremble beneath him.

“You want it hard?” he asks softly.

I slowly shake my head.

“Not this time.”

He leans on me, my arms curling around him, my fingers learning every line and scar. I slide my hand down his back and fan my fingers over his butt, pressing my lips into his shoulder.

“Jaden,” I call him softly as he moves his body on top of mine, his fingers tangled in my hair.

He does it again and again, the pulse between my legs growing faster and stronger.

“I’m coming... baby,” I murmur, the word slipping out without much thought.

He pushes up a little and, holding me against his body, starts slamming his hard meat into me.

He rams me hard as the pleasure spikes through both of us. Groans roll off his lips— the most erotic sound I’ve ever heard.

Shuddering with pleasure, he closes his eyes, lust and power coursing through his veins.

Moments later, he crashes at my side, his hand palming his groin. He lies still for a second before he swiftly pulls away and strolls into the bathroom.



SILENCE FILLS THE ROOMS, followed by the sound of running water.

I take a long breath and roll onto my side, glancing out the window. The sky lights up the horizon.

Minutes later, the water stops, and the bathroom door opens and closes. I expect him to come back to me.

Instead, his footsteps ring on the porch.

I push off the bed, throw a robe on and walk outside.

He sits at the table, smoking, his eyes drawn to the ocean. Drops of water cling to his skin.

I pull a chair out and take a seat.

He puts his cigarette out and motions to me as he rises to his feet.

“Come,” he says, taking my hand.

He leads me down the stairs to the beach. Nonchalantly, he shimmies out of his sweatpants and peels the robe off my shoulders.

Nervously, I look around.

“What if someone sees us?”

“We’ll get out before the sun comes out.”

He pulls me into the ocean, the water quickly rising to my chest. Dark, the mass of water stretches out before me as far as I can see.

Panic crashes through my blood.

“I can’t,” I mutter, barely feeling the ocean floor beneath my feet.

I start swimming back.

He catches me and pulls me back to him. I lock my arms around his neck and loop my legs around his waist.

He pivots so I can see the shore.

“Is this better ?” he asks.

I nod, my gaze dipping to his lips.

“What scares you?” he asks in the same soft voice.

“The ocean.”

“Not now. ”

Holding my gaze, he lets his eyes drill deep into places I’ve always tried to hide.

Gently, I touch his face and lips with trembling fingers.

What scares me?

Nothing. Not anymore.

But I can’t tell him why, so I stay silent.

“Why were you set on me?” he asks, locking my eyes again. “Why me, Senna? Anyone could’ve given you what you wanted.”

I slowly shake my head.

“I’m not so sure,” I say, a smile tugging at my lips. “I don’t know why. That’s how I felt... Right from the beginning. Something pulled me to you. I can’t explain what it was. It hadn’t happened to me before, so I went for it. I followed my instinct.”

He ponders for a moment.

“Weren’t you afraid?”

I shake my head.

“Not many things scare me, and men surely are not one of them. I knew you weren’t any man, but it didn’t matter to me. Perhaps I saw in you something I hadn’t seen in anyone other than in myself. That’s why I couldn’t just walk away and forget about you. I had to find out whether what I saw was real or not. In a way, I had no choice. I had to try to get to you. ”

I pause.

“For a long time, I was trapped in my own world, convinced that my fate was sealed. There was very little chance I’d find someone like you, so I seized the opportunity.”

“And?”

I stroke his neck.

“I think you are much more than I imagined and way deeper than I envisioned. And I think your life is full of secrets and stories and scars. Some of them are on your arms, and some of them are in your heart.”

He watches me in silence, his eyes glinting silver in the moonlight.

Nothing reads on his face.

“You don’t like to talk much,” I say, my thumb trailing his lips, my gaze hovering over his mouth.

“No kiss, you say.”

“No,” he murmurs.

“What would it take to—”

He glances at the horizon.

“The sun is rising. We need to go back,” he says, cutting me off brashly.

Without another word, he breaks away from me and swims away. I have to follow him, so I head for the shore.

# S ENNA

THE SMELL of food fills my nostrils, pulling me out of my sleep.

I open my eyes, blink a few times and glance out the window.

It's still dark. How long have I slept?

Naked, I roll between the sheets before I suddenly bolt upright, panic surging through my blood.

I realize that it's evening. As in Saturday evening.

Oh, shit.

The party must be in full swing.

“Jaden?”

Where is he?

I push off the bed and frantically search the rooms.

A dinner table for two is set on the terrace, a delicious smell wafting through the air.

My stomach growls.

I wish I had time to eat.

I can't believe he let me sleep the entire day and didn't wake me.

Maybe I should take a bite. I put food on a plate and rush inside, straight to the closet.

Food and clothes don't mix well, especially when you're in a hurry. I do my best not to ruin my evening gown while shoving food into my mouth.

I place my dress and shoes on the bed, stuff my mouth with food one last time, and enter the shower.

Minutes later, I put my makeup on in front of the mirror before carefully painting my lips, highlighting my eyes, brushing my hair, slipping into my dress, and examining my reflection.

The green metallic evening gown clings to my body, setting off my breasts and backside. Satin strips embellished with rhinestone buckles criss-cross my bare back while emerald earrings dangle from my earlobes, almost touching my shoulders.

I put my heels on and strut to the door.

Gingerly, I follow the path of petals to the building hosting the event. The place is packed. There are way more guests than I expected.

They fill the ballroom and the terrace, and some of them are clustered on the beach. Who are all these people?

I can't find a familiar face.

Eventually, I spot a few family friends. They recognize me, and we stop to chat.

It doesn't take long before I pull away from the crowd and settle on the terrace.

"Senna?"

Isabel's voice makes me turn around and take her in.

A beaded nude gown hugs her body.

"Do you feel any better?" she asks, throwing me for a loop.

“Do I feel any better?” I mutter, lifting an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Your stomach... Jaden said you didn’t feel well. Hopefully, it wasn’t the food.”

“Oh, my stomach... Yes. It’s much better, and I’m sure it wasn’t the food,” I say, rolling with whatever shit he’s told her.

Why would he say something like that?

“Well, I’m glad,” she says.

“Have you seen him by any chance?” I ask, worried.

She looks at me, puzzled.

“Jaden,” I say.

“Oh, yes. He sat with us at the table a few minutes ago.”

She cranes her neck, looking for him inside. Unable to locate him, she searches for him outside.

“Isn’t he there?” she asks, pointing across the terrace.

Propped on a railing, his hand tucked in his pocket, his eyes narrowed with a smile, he listens to a voluptuous brunette who slobbers over him as if the sun rises from his eyes.

My teeth grit.

“Yeah... That’s him,” I murmur.

“I’ll see you inside,” Isabel says, registering my expression.

“Okay,” I mutter, unable to peel my eyes away from him.

She strolls away and talks to someone else.

“Hey.”

An arm snakes around my waist before twirling me around.

“Hey,” I say, smiling softly.

“Are you okay?” Nick asks.

“Yes. Why?”

“Your friend told us the story.”

“What story?” I ask, irritated.

“The shark story. He said you were swimming, and a shark had followed you. Are the sharks swimming so close to the shore?”

Oh... He didn't say that.

“Yes, the shark story... It was terrible,” I say before excusing myself and tearing away from him. “I'll talk to you later,” I add.

Holding the bottom of my gown, I cut my way through groups of people when someone bumps into me, making me stumble into a woman nearby.

“Senna?”

The woman's voice draws me to a stop.

If she's here, he must be here as well.

I turn around.

“Evelyne,” I say dryly, a cold smile plastered across my face.

She runs her eyes over me, not even trying to hide her disappointment.

“You cut your hair,” I say to start a conversation.

Her blonde hair is shorter than I remember, barely touching her shoulders. Her fake lashes give her a gaunt look.

The black gown makes her look older and skinnier, arguably not something she needs.

“You look different,” she says, her eyes lingering on my body.

“I do?”

“Yes. Trashier,” she says, throwing the word without flinching.

Her lips crease in disgust.

“I bet it sits well with a certain type of man,” she adds.



“What kind of man?” I ask, pushing back a retort.

“Players, drifters. The man you date. That writer... I always thought you’d go for something better than that,” she says condescendingly. “I’m not so sure now. Not when you look like this. No serious man would marry someone like you.”

“I’m not looking for a husband.”

A malicious smile stretches across her lips.

“Maybe you should. Good looks don’t last forever. Besides, you don’t have an education, a career, not even a vocational skill. Nothing to make a living with. What is it that you do? Dumpster diving?”

I blanch.

She can’t possibly know.

“Are you mooching on someone? Oh, wait...”

A grin curves her lips.

“Have you gotten yourself a sugar daddy?”

I suck in a short breath.

“It was nice seeing you, Evelyne,” I say curtly, trying to avoid the trap, although it’s too late.

Her eyes flick over my shoulder just as I spin around.

“Senna?”

The male voice slices through me with the precision of a laser, rendering me still.

My knees soften as my hands tremble, and a shiver sweeps my spine. Evelyne’s eyes stay on me, gauging my reaction while I step back and face her husband.

“Lance.”

His eyes lock mine, no emotion flashing through his gaze.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” he says.

I can almost sense Evelyne’s pulse exploding in her fragile neck.

“Where have you been hiding?” he tosses at me as Evelyne’s attention shifts to someone else.

A dark glint glimmers in his eyes as he scans my dress and body.

“You haven’t changed,” he murmurs.

His undertone comes with a wolfish smile and no mystery. I know exactly what he means.

He hasn’t changed, either. Dark-haired and muscular, he has wandering eyes and sinful lips.

“If anything, you’re more beautiful,” he says quietly, running his gaze over me again, and swiftly undressing me with his eyes.

Evelyne turns to us when a familiar scent of cologne rolls to me, and Jaden’s arm loops around my waist. He splays his fingers over my back.

“Where have you been?” he murmurs, planting a kiss on my lips, acting by all means.

We connect eyes, and we stall for a moment, sharing a stare that makes my heart flutter despite the man and the woman gawking at us.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he says while I give him a swift once over, hardly hiding my surprise.

His tuxedo falls smoothly over his hard body, his hair all swept back, revealing his stunning face.

His eyes give away his sexual power, his smile making me all tingly and wet.

Slowly raising an eyebrow, he revels in my surprise.

I watch him run his fingers along my jawline and curl his lips into a warm smile.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Lance shifting his gaze from Jaden to me and back to Jaden as he tightens his arm around my waist and pulls me into him.

I wrap my arm around Jaden and rest my head against his shoulder.

The brief moment, as fake as it is, spurs butterflies in my stomach.

“How’s the writing business these days?” Lance asks.

His irony is unwarranted.

“It has never been better,” Jaden says, curving his lips into a mischievous smile, and for a moment, I fear his retort.

To my surprise, he reins in his reaction.

“People love my work,” he says, sweet and pure like an angel. “They love it so much they chase me around for more,” he murmurs.

I bite my lip to stifle a grin.

“It’s not for everybody, and it’s an acquired taste, but it makes people tremendously happy,” he says, adding a charming smile to his charade.

Evelyne opens her mouth to comment.

Faster than her, Jaden turns to me.

“You must be hungry, love,” he says, lacing his fingers through mine.

He waves them goodbye, and I do the same while Lance and Evelyne watch us walk away.

As we put some space between the partygoers and us, Jaden takes his hands off me and undoes his bow tie, his smile fading abruptly.

“Who the hell are these people?” he asks, pissed.

We near the corner of the building when he tucks the bow tie into his pocket.

“Jaden?”

I grip his arm. He turns to me, his eyes heavy with disappointment, light-gray like piles of ashes.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“That’s not nothing. Did they say something to you?”

He tilts his lips into a sad smile.

“Do they really need to?”

“They can be mean sometimes,” I say.

“That’s not mean. I don’t give a fuck about them being mean. I couldn’t care less about that. Besides, mean is genuine, but these people are just...”

He pauses, looking for the right words.

“They think so highly of themselves that they resent anything that doesn’t fit their views on life.”

“It’s just a different world. They don’t like me either, if that’s any consolation,” I murmur.

“No, it’s not... Why would they not like you?”

“I’m different than them.”

“You mean you’re not stuck up.”

I smile.

“Yeah... You can put it that way.”

“Money is a wonderful thing if you don’t let it go to your head,” he says, bitter and disillusioned. “Do you mind if I go back?” he asks.

My eyes stay on him, the emotions flitting through his eyes, showing me a different side of him.

He looks so much different than the man propped on his bike in the back alley selling his body for a buck.

“What is it?”

“You look good,” I say, my eyes moving down. “The tuxedo looks great on you.”

“You too,” he says, giving me a side-eyed glance.

“What did they say to you?”

“It wasn’t about me. They said a lot about you.”

“Really? What exactly did they say?”

A bitter smile tugs at his lips.

“That you’re a failure... And you would’ve had a great future had you not dropped out of Med School. That no decent man would marry you.”

I sigh.

“You can’t change the way people think or see things.”

He shifts his eyes to me.

“If you’re a failure, what the hell am I ?” he asks.

“Listen... It doesn’t matter what they say.”

“It doesn’t matter what they say unless it’s the truth.”

He pulls away, heading to the bungalow.

I pick up the bottom of my gown and rush after him, trying to keep my balance.

“It’s not the truth, Jaden,” I say, catching up with him.

“It’s not when it comes to you. You’re as far from a failure as I’ve ever seen. I don’t know anyone else so young, making the kind of money you make and running their life the way they want. And unless you do something illegal— which I doubt—you’re someone I’d consider a success.”

He stops, and I do that, too, trying to catch my breath.

“Do you really mean it?” I ask.

“Every fucking word,” he says.

We enter the bungalow a few moments later.

He darts to the closet and spends a few moments collecting his clothes before slipping his travel bag onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m leaving.”

“You don’t have to leave. We’re not going back.”

“It doesn’t make a difference to me,” he says, shedding his clothes.

He pulls his jeans and a T-shirt on and then shoves everything else into his bag.

He places the tuxedo on the bed.

“I’m not such a success,” I say, my voice lined with a rather sad realization.

“Why’s that?”

“I have nothing besides money.”

“And independence,” he adds. “That’s not nothing.”

“Okay. But it hasn’t always been like that. I’ve been where you are.”

He drops everything on the bed and closes the distance between us.

“Have you?” he asks, darkness glinting in his eyes.

I nod.

“Yes...” I say softly. “Years back, I was out on the street, looking for food in the dumpsters and taking jobs that wouldn’t leave me with enough money to buy the cardboard I had slept on under the bridge. And it’s not as if I didn’t think about sucking cock for money, but I wouldn’t have survived on the street. I would’ve been dead by now.”

He ponders what I just said, a new thought erasing the emotion in his eyes.

“I need to go,” he says and saunters away.

“I’ll come with you,” I say, running my hand down my back and pulling the zipper.

The gown falls to the floor.

He cuts his eyes at me as I flick my bra open and let it slide off my shoulders.

Unexpectedly, he turns to me, two strides bringing him to me.

I step back and lean against the wall while he braces his palms on either side of me, his eyes searching mine.

“Is that the real reason you pursued me?” he asks softly.

He tilts his head down, his gaze rooted on my lips.

“I saw myself in you,” I say.

He cups my face and trails my jawline with his thumb.

“You’re no longer living on the street. How can you possibly see yourself in me?”

I shrug, my eyes still locked with his.

“I don’t know, but that’s how I felt.”

More moments of silence pass as I examine his eyes.

“Why do you need rough sex?” he asks.

“I can’t get off. Most of the time, I can’t even get turned on without it,” I say.

“Were you always like that?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you fuck Nick then?”

“He...”

I throw him a questioning look.

“How do you know about Nick?” I ask.

He flashes a knowing smile.

“I did it for him,” I say.

“So much kindness on your part. So you faked it, then?”

“He doesn’t know.”

He looks down, his hands sliding slowly over my chest before cupping my breasts.

Goosebumps dot my skin, my nipples puckering.

“I turn you on...” he says, cutting his eyes at me. “Even without the hard stuff...” he says.

“Yes, you do.”

“You were turned on when you saw me with that man in the back alley.”

I nod.

“Yes, I was.”

“You liked it?” he murmurs, his lips gently brushing mine.

Heat builds in my chest, and wetness trickles into my panties.

“You’re turned on now...”

“Yes...” I say in a quivering voice.

He kneads my breasts and slowly flicks my nipples with his thumbs.

I push my chest against his touch, sliding my hands to his hips. He presses his body against mine, and I let out a quiet sigh.

“You like this?” he murmurs.

I nod, my fingers slipping under his T-shirt, brushing his abs. He reaches back with one hand, pulls the T-shirt off his torso, and drops it to the floor.

“I want to feel you, too,” he says as he pushes his chest against my breasts, igniting a fire inside me.

“Why don’t you like to kiss?” I ask.

A smile arches his lips.

“It’s the only thing that’s still mine.”

“Is there anyone special that you like to kiss?”

He clicks his tongue.

“No. I haven’t been romantically involved with someone in a long time.”

“I haven’t been either. That was not what I was looking for.”

“What was it then?”

I think about it.

“I wanted someone... like me.”

He caresses my face, waiting for me to continue.



“Someone broken. Scarred. Perhaps alone. A dark heart,” I murmur bitterly.

He runs his fingers over my lashes, wiping away a few tears, and I close my eyes, hoping that he can make an exception, change his mind, and perhaps... kiss me.

His breath fans over my lips, fueling my hope.

I feel his tender touch, his fingers brushing my face, his lips so close, almost touching mine.

I open my eyes just as he angles his head and brings his lips to mine. A moan climbs out of my chest when he touches my lips and moves his tongue with mine.

He leans into me as I curl my arms around his neck, kissing him back.

He deepens the kiss, the intimate connection electrifying my body, stirring a frenzy inside me.

I moan softly, quickly becoming a blaze.

Smoothly, he breaks away.

“We need to go,” he says, his voice cold this time, and my heart becomes a blizzard.

# JADEN

I CAN'T IGNORE IT. I can't fucking ignore it.

I read the message again, gritting my teeth and clenching my fists.

'HE KNOWS WHERE YOU LIVE. Meet me tonight. The usual place and time.'

I LEARNED EARLY in my life that mistakes come with a hefty price, and they're almost never worth it.

Sure, people say you learn from your mistakes.

Yeah. Well, most things I learned didn't help me much, and the price was still too much to pay.

I dismount my bike and swagger across the parking lot, scanning the street from time to time.

This isn't the cheapest hotel in town, yet it's not five-star. But I understand her reasons.

It's more difficult to get spotted in a place like this.

I wish I had known who her husband was when one of his men hired me to fuck her so that his boss could watch us.

I never cared to ask about him. Mainly because I almost never do. I don't need to.

Frankly, it's easier that way.

Had I known she was some local, small-time drug dealer's wife or that she'd become obsessed with me, I would've never touched her.

Things went well the first time we met. So well, I couldn't anticipate any problems. And then she wanted an encore—without him watching, as these things usually go.

She hired me the second time and paid me a few times over my going rate.

I should've known right then and there that it would cost me later, but I couldn't come up with a good enough reason to decline her offer.

The fact that she was hot didn't help a bit.

I knew she was trouble right from the get-go, but people do stupid shit when they are broke, and I was no exception.

I cut her loose eventually, but it was too little, too late. She couldn't let go of me.

I strung her along as much as I could, but she eventually realized I wouldn't fuck her again, so she blackmailed me.

Somehow I missed the fact that she wasn't the kind of woman who takes no for an answer, and before I knew it, she told her husband about me.

That's how it all came crashing down on me, and I found out who he really was.

Let's say it wasn't a pretty meet and greet.

Not at all.

His goons left me bruised in a parking lot not far from Jill's.

The fact that I left one with his head cracked open and the other with his balls slashed didn't help my cause either.

I stopped going to Jill's.

I didn't plan to go back on the streets, anyway. Not so fast, and not after those nights with Senna.

Things seemed to calm down for a while, and Carla, the married woman, stopped texting me. I was truly hoping she had given up.

I haven't heard from her up until now.

I wish this were nothing more than a trick to get me back in a room with her again, but something tells me that it's not. If that's the case, I can't bring this kind of person near my home.

I gaze down the corridor, furtively checking a man and a woman walking away. I am perusing the room numbers when a door opens, and Carla pulls me in.

She shows me to the couch, but I know better than that, so I stand. Running her fingers through her long blonde hair, she examines me.

She tilts her chin up, pointing to the scratches and the bruises marring my arm. Then she flicks her finger to the cut on my lip.

"Is that him?"

"No," I say, lying.

"You want a drink?"

"No, thanks."

She pours herself a glass of gin.

"I missed you, Jaden."

"That's not why we're here, are we?"

She glances at me, sadness flitting through her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think he's such an idiot," she murmurs.

"Why is he after me?"

“I broke up with him.”

“Why the hell did you do that?”

A smile creases her lips.

“Is that really a question?”

“Yeah. It fucking is, especially when it comes to men like him. Although the real question is, why would you mess with someone like him in the first place?”

She nonchalantly shrugs and sips her drink before lowering herself into a chair and crossing her long legs, making sure her knees point to me.

“Why am I still in the mix, Carla? I thought I made things clear.”

She flicks her hand up.

“I know. I know...” she says, irritated. “He didn’t believe me when I told him that leaving him had nothing to do with you.”

“How come?” I ask, tucking a cigarette between my lips.

She tosses me a smoldering look while I run the flame over the tip of my cigarette.

Squinting, I take a long drag and blow the smoke out.

She searches my eyes.

“I told him I’m in love with you,” she says.

Oddly enough, I spend a few seconds registering the slight swinging of her heel-clad foot and her annoying smile.

What an idiot I was to mess with this woman.

“Why the hell would you tell him that?”

“Because it’s true,” she says, her eyes hovering over me.

I glance at her, cold.

“We fucked. That’s all it was.”

A smirk creases her lips.

“You think you’re the only one who was hired to fuck me? There were men before you, and usually, he joined us, but it was different with you. I couldn’t stand him when you were fucking me, and then I couldn’t stand him alone, and that’s how I knew. I never bothered to fuck escorts on the side. That was the whole point. Not to cheat on him. That whole thing shifted when I met you.”

Her eyes express disappointment.

“For some reason, I thought you felt the same way,” she says.

“Why would you think that?”

“You had fun...” she argues, arching her back and pushing her chest forward.

“I was paid to have fun.”

Her hand flicks her long hair over her shoulder, her lips curving into a flirtatious grin.

“As I said, you weren’t the first man he had paid to have fun with me, so I know a thing or two about fucking.”

“Call it chemistry for all I care but don’t fool yourself that it was something it was not.”

“Whatever,” she says dismissively.

Restlessness grows in me.

I blow the smoke to the side and stub the cigarette out.

She speaks again.

“Anyway, I told him I no longer see you, but the fact that I’m leaving him drives him crazy. That’s why I wanted to warn you. They’ll come looking for you.”

She snatches her purse off the couch and fumbles through its contents before rising to her feet.

A small piece of paper dangles from her fingers.

“This is the address that they have. One of his men gave it to me.”

She hands it to me.

“They want you, but they’ll use your family if they need to, whether it’s your dying grandma or your pet...”

“Thanks,” I say curtly.

Without another word, I pull out of her room.

Swiftly, I make the trip back to my bike, and as I stride across the empty parking, I make the call.

“Yes... Tonight. Eleven o’clock. At Jill’s.”



## SENNA

THE PHONE GOES OFF AGAIN.

It’s Friday evening, and the damn thing buzzes like a bee. Abel, Nick, Adele. Isabel called twice.

Sadly, my attempt to reconnect with my family has failed miserably.

Luckily, we didn’t kill each other, and we’d probably see each other again at the wedding, but nothing else came out of it.

When I returned, I gave my staff time off and buried myself in work. For the last couple of weeks, I’ve pretty much lived on the couch with my laptop glued to my lap and bags of junk food nearby.

Jaden and I split ways in front of Jill’s the night we came back. He didn’t want me to drop him off at home, and I didn’t ask questions, fearing I might look obsessed with him.

Not that I’m not.

He hailed a cab as I was waiting in my car, and without a glance in my direction, he slipped inside and pulled away.

I’ve never seen him since.

A couple of nights ago, I stopped at Jill's and asked Scottie about him, hoping he's not back on the streets again, turning tricks.

The bartender told me he hadn't seen him in a while, which was good news in a way but also bad.

What if he had vanished?

I throw on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a leather jacket. Briefly, I check my reflection in the mirror before I grab my car keys and walk out of my home.

I lock the door behind me, and thirty minutes later, I bring my Camaro to a stop in front of Jill's.

I turn off the engine and spend a couple of moments scanning the people standing on the sidewalk.

There are a lot of regulars—the working girls included—but not one person that I know.

I climb out of my car, cut my way through the crowd gathered in front of the establishment, and walk inside.

For about an hour, I watch groups of men and women pulling in and out, people getting drunk, making out, or cutting sordid deals in front of the sports bar.

Close to midnight, the crowd thins out, and the traffic gets lighter. I slide off my chair and walk across the room, heading to the bathroom.

I stroll back a few minutes later when a familiar silhouette slides onto a barstool, catching my eye.

Harboring mixed feelings, I veer to the bar and claim a seat next to him.

He throws me a glance before taking a swig from his drink, his expression hidden behind his glass.

My fingers slide over his hand.

He pulls it away and places it on his thigh, not fast enough, though, and I notice the bruises and small cuts on his arm.

I raise my eyes and spot more marks on his neck and lips.



They look days old.

“Jaden?” I call softly.

He tosses his drink back, throws cash on the bar, pushes off the chair, and dashes to the back exit. I pay for my food and drinks and follow him.

The back alley is empty, sunk in darkness. He rushes around the corner and vanishes out of my sight. I sprint to catch up with him, yet by the time I make it around the building, car doors shut closed with a muffled sound, and a big, black SUV backs up and pulls away, leaving behind a swirl of dust.

I dart to the parking lot, my hand sliding into my pocket, fumbling for my keys.

Fuck.

I spin around and jog back to the bar, storming inside. My car keys dangle from Scottie’s hand.

“Thanks so much,” I say hurriedly before I grab them and push out the door.

The Camaro revs up with a roar as I pull onto the main road. I stop at the first intersection and look up and down the street, pondering my options.

Following a hunch, I steer right.

New homes sprawl out on both sides of the road for a few good miles before a wall of trees and vegetation lines the path.

Once in a while, the headlights of an oncoming car sweep my windshield, blinding me.

For the most part, the night is silent, and the sky is full of stars, a smell of smoke drifting through the open windows.

As the road becomes deserted and homes are no longer in sight, I begin to doubt I picked the right route.

A few minutes later, I pull over to the side of the road, cut off the engine, and listen. Deceiving moonlight streams through the trees, a bunch of frogs and crickets filling the air with their noise.

I sigh when I ‘think’ I hear a man’s voice.

I listen attentively. The muffled dialogue fades in and out before a male voice shouts.

The headlights of a car flicker behind a group of trees, and I notice a small meadow stretching out not far from me.

I shift the key into the ignition, and keeping the lights off, I swerve back onto the road.

Slowly, I roll to the edge of the woods and turn right onto a secondary dirt road that cuts through the clusters of trees leading to the meadow.

The black SUV sits on the right side of the road. All four doors are open.

A foreboding sensation washes over me.

This is much more than I thought.

A couple of men stand in front of the car, their buffed-up silhouettes dark against the headlights.

One of them looks familiar.

I flick my eyes to the SUV again. The memory comes back to me. This is the man who harassed me the night I spotted Jaden for the first time.

They shout at someone lying on the ground, holding him at gunpoint. I crane my neck to take a better look.

There are two men down.

One is sprawled on his back and has his knee bent. The other one lies on his stomach, his hands clasped at the back of his head.

My heart stops as I recognize Jaden’s emblazoned black racer jacket.

None of them move, although Jaden slowly tries to lift his head.

One of the standing men barks at him.

He freezes.

I keep rolling until the rumbling noise of my car makes them shift their eyes to me. My heart pounds ferociously.

Reaching under the back seat, I brush my gun.

I keep rolling. They swivel around fast. At the very same moment, I flick on the headlights and drown them in a thick beam of dense light.

Swiftly, I hit the brakes and pull the gun out before I swing the car door open and jump out.

“Drop your weapon and move away from him,” I shout at the man who stands next to Jaden.

My voice rings cold, without a trace of emotion in it.

The men freeze for a moment.

Shrouded in darkness behind the headlights, I watch them shield their eyes from the blinding light.

“Drop the fucking weapon!” I bark again.

The man I know from Jill’s swaggers toward me.

Laughing.

“Is that you, Senna?”

“Stay the fuck away,” I snarl as he edges closer.

“Senna baby, this night gets better by the minute. Truly, I couldn’t have asked for more. I’ve been dreaming about pounding that sweet pussy of yours for weeks now,” he sneers, his words a distant buzz in my head as I keep my eyes on the man with the gun.

He flicks his hand in my direction, and I pull the trigger.

The sound splits the air, the echo floating above us as the man’s gun bites the dust. He bends at the waist, screaming in pain, his hand tucked between his knees.

“Fucking bitch!”

The big mouth halts, finally taking notice.

“Senna, baby, calm down.”

“I’m not your fucking baby.”

He clicks his tongue, mockingly disappointed, and then he shakes his head.

His hands grip his hips, his chin flicking toward the ground.

“Are you here because of him?” he asks, pointing at Jaden, not sparing me his disdain for him.

I stay silent.

“Is he the man you fuck?” he throws at me again. “If he is, you have no idea how much trouble you’re in. No dick is worth that kind of headache,” he says.

I quietly laugh.

A crazy, cold chuckle.

“No need to worry, dickhead. I got myself in big trouble a long time ago. This shit means nothing to me. I’ve seen dicks like you all my life. Do you think you have balls because you’re cruising around with these jerks in tow, harassing women, or fucking up outnumbered men? That’s manhood to you? You’re nothing but a piece of shit. Let him go.”

He doesn’t move.

“Let him fucking go!!” I snarl, the echo of my voice vibrating in the air.

“You’ll regret this,” he tosses at me, no longer smiling or in a mood to fuck with me.

“I regret my whole damn life, jerk, and there’s nothing I can do about it, is it? Now take your fucking men and leave.”

He turns around and motions to the injured man, who’s still groaning with his hand between his knees. The man limps to the car and crawls in while the big mouth picks up the third man from the ground. He shoves him into the car before climbing in. I wait until they close the doors and pull away, my gun aimed at their SUV.

A few minutes pass before the lights and noise fade away.

I spin around, take a few steps, kneel and bend over Jaden.

A big stain of blood soaks the flank of his T-shirt.

“Jaden?”

He groans, barely moving his head.

I curl my fingers around the hemline of his T-shirt, tear it open, and inspect his body. It looks like a knife wound. The blade must've glided over the ribs, missing his vital organs.

His arm is covered in blood.

“Can you walk?” I ask, sliding my arm under his shoulder.

He nods softly, rolling onto his side and trying to push up as I pull him.

I manage to bring him to a standing position.

“Lean on me,” I say as he struggles to maintain his balance.

He barely walks, groaning with each step.

Somehow, we make it to the car, and he climbs in. He leans back in his seat as I brush his hair away from his face, blood and dirt sticking to my fingers.

I pull my phone out.

“No hospital...” he mutters, his bloodied hand sliding over mine. “Please,” he groans.

“I'll pay for it.”

“No,” he says firmly, frustration exploding in his voice. “I can't go to the hospital... I can't go home either,” he says quietly this time.

I toss the phone to the side and stare at him for a moment. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes, wincing in pain.

I shove the keys into the ignition and turn the engine on.

We make the trip to my place in perfect silence.

An hour later, we roll through the gates and enter my driveway. I bring the car to a stop in front of the entrance and help him out.

Slowly, we walk inside.

“Wait here,” I say, propping him against the kitchen counter.

I pull my jacket off while kicking my boots off, and then I run to the bathroom and grab a pair of gloves.

I put them on and rush back.

“Okay, now let’s go slowly,” I say and walk him to the bathroom.

I turn the shower on, peel his jacket off, and cut the rest of the blood-drenched T-shirt off his torso before I remove his jeans and boxer shorts.

Thoroughly, I inspect his body and wounds, looking for foreign objects, shards of glass, rocks, and dirt. Anything stuck to his skin or buried in his wounds.

“You need stitches,” I say as I pull a suture kit from a cabinet.

He nods.

“It will hurt a little,” I say.

He tips his chin down again.

Gently, I start to clean his skin and wounds.

It’s a long, meticulous process, which often makes his muscles tense and his jaw clench.

As I get closer to his cuts, he closes his eyes, hardening his muscles even more. I carefully disinfect them before I suture them.

Once I finish up, I apply the sterile dressings and bring him a clean robe.

Leaning on me, we walk into the bedroom.

“Thank you,” he murmurs as he slowly lowers himself onto the bed.

Slowly, he sprawls on his back and closes his eyes.

A moment later, I walk into the living room, pull my laptop open and place an order.

# S ENNA

THE DOORBELL RINGS, the sound drilling into my brain.

I jerk upright and glance at the kitchen's clock.

Shit. It's really late.

I jump off the couch and dash out the door, running my hand over my eyes and raking my fingers through my hair.

The carrier greets me and hands me a box. I sign for it, and he quickly pulls away.

I bring the box inside the house, set it on the table, and open it. I pull out the clothes, remove the packaging and take them to the bedroom. The water runs in the bathroom.

I lay the clothes on the bed and wait.

"Hey."

His soft voice echoes behind me.

I spin around.

"Hey."

A towel wraps around his waist, hugging his muscular thighs. His body is now a board of scars, tattoos, and wounds covered by dressings, scratches, and bruises.

"I need to check them," I say, motioning to his torso.

He lowers himself on the bed while I pull a pair of gloves on. Quietly, he observes me as I examine his wounds and change his dressings.

“Why did you drop out of school?” he asks after a few more moments.

I glance at him.

His blue-gray eyes study me, curious. I shift my focus back to his chest.

“You would’ve made a good doctor,” he says.

I breathe out a soft chuckle.

“I’m good with you. Normally, I have a hard time dealing with people. Besides, I have a bad temper. I can inflict pain as quickly as I can heal someone,” I joke.

I raise my eyes again.

“Why are you good with me?” he asks.

“Because I like you.”

Pain flashes through his eyes as I touch a sensitive area.

He tenses and closes his eyes, and for a moment, my gaze lingers on his features, so attractive, despite the ache on his face.

His lips part slightly, and my eyes get lost in the sight as my hands keep working.

“Why would you like someone like me?” he finally asks, observing me with half-shut eyes.

I peel my gaze away from his face and shrug.

“I don’t know. I don’t like many people, but I like you,” I say.

A few moments of silence pass.

I feel the heat of his stare on my face, yet I keep working without lifting my gaze.

“I don’t think you’re as bad as you want me to believe,” he murmurs.



“Maybe I’m not, but I’m not that good either,” I say, smiling bittersweet.

A soft exhale falls from his lips.

“You’re not worse than other people,” he says as we connect eyes again.

His gaze makes me warm, the heat rolling from my nipples to my toes.

A soft smile curls his lips.

“I’m not so sure you know what being bad really means,” he says, wincing in pain again.

I study him. He evades my eyes this time.

“What would’ve happened to you had I not come?” I ask.

He shrugs and lifts his gaze. His deeply buried sadness puts pain in my chest.

“Whatever was meant to happen,” he says, disconnected from that grim outcome.

His ruefulness makes me ache again.

My hands stop for a moment as I suck in a gulp of air.

“What?”

“They would’ve probably killed you,” I say, focusing on the task at hand.

“Most likely not,” he says, calm.

I flick my eyes up from his chest, shaking my head disapprovingly.

“Okay. There was that possibility,” he concedes.

“Why would you go with them? You knew they were up to no good.”

His eyes meet mine again.

Cold and reserved this time, and I quickly realize I’m in a different territory. It’s not my business, after all. At least, it shouldn’t be.

I'm sure that's what he thinks.

I keep my mouth shut and let the silence grow.

"I had no choice," he says after a while. "They wanted me, and that was the only way to stop them," he adds and pauses, unwilling to elaborate.

A few moments tick by.

"So... About the school. There must've been more than one reason you didn't want to finish it," he says.

"It was more than the school itself," I say, straightening and peeling off the gloves. "It was the lifestyle that came with it. And the people. You met some of them at the party. I'm not one of them," I say, cleaning the bed. "That kind of life would've killed me. Hungry?" I toss at him, keen to change the topic.

"Yes."

I motion to him.

He follows me into the living room.

"I ordered food. It should be here any minute," I say.

"You shouldn't have. I can fix food."

"Today, you won't," I say, registering the grimace on his face. "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah... It does."

He glances at the state-of-the-art kitchen.

Almost as big as the living room, the kitchen is well equipped for a gourmet experience. Stainless steel appliances line the wall, and pots and pans dangle from the ceiling.

He shifts his gaze to me.

"It came with the house. I don't know how to cook," I say.

"Good thing you know to handle a gun..." he mutters.

"I like guns," I say, barely stifling a grin.

He sits on the couch and swivels his head, his eyes scanning the living room.

“Where’s my jacket?”

“At the cleaners.”

He tries to push up to his legs, shuddering in pain.

“Don’t move,” I say. “Why do you need it?”

“Have you emptied my pockets?”

“Yes.”

I walk to the kitchen counter and sift through the contents of a box.

“What are you looking for?” I ask, taking inventory of his wallet, keys, a pack of cigarettes, a small roll wrapped in plastic, and condoms.

I flick my gaze to him.

“Are you, um... back at work?” I ask, finding it difficult to voice my question.

He slowly shakes his head.

“There’s, um....” I mumble, gearing my eyes toward the condoms. “Never mind. It’s not my business,” I say, lifting my gaze.

I find no emotion on his face.

He narrows his eyes at me and throws me a gaze, guarded.

“There’s a piece of paper in the wallet with an address scribbled on it,” he says evenly.

I pull his wallet open and retrieve the piece of paper.

“I need you to do something for me,” he says.

“Okay.”

“Are you easy to be found?”

I shift my eyes to him.

“What do you mean?”

“Your phone number, name, and address. Are they public?”

A smile flutters across my lips.

“No, not really. Why?”

“The men from last night. They know who you are.”

“They’ve seen me a couple of times and know my first name, but they have no idea who I am. No one knows. I’ve worked diligently to hide my business and personal affairs from my family and everybody else. So no, I can’t be tracked down. Nobody knows where I live. And except for the staff members, one of my employees, and now you, nobody has ever come to my house. Rest assured, they can’t find you.”

“It’s not about me... I don’t care if they find me,” he deadpans, motioning to the box.

“I need you to take the cash to the address on that piece of paper.”

“What’s this?” I ask, wrapping my fingers around the roll of cash.

“The money you gave me.”

I glance at him.

“Who do I give it to?” I ask, intrigued at first, then grappling with a bad feeling.

“Her name is...”

He pauses, shifts his position, and winces again, and I suspect he’s also buying some time while gauging my reaction.

His eyes stay on me a little longer.

”Her name is Sara,” he finally says, his eyes bleeding sorrow.

It hurts me to see him like that, and it’s a new inexplicable feeling.

It feels like grief.

Slowly, he turns his head and glances at the Christmas tree.

“If it’s not too much... Can you buy a Christmas present for a little girl? With money from that stash.”

A hole grows in my chest, and I'm about to fall into it.

"Sure," I say, my voice unraveling.

"What do you want me to buy?" I ask, evading his eyes and making myself busy with the stuff on the counter, trying to hide my trembling hands.

"Whatever you think a three-old would like. Her name is Emma."

His voice shakes a little as he utters her name, and my knees are about to give in.

I look at him.

His eyes glint with emotion, veiled by the mist of tears. A lump forms in my throat.

I glance away again, grappling with my own feelings, when the doorbell rings.

Just in time.

I dart to the door, bring the food inside and set it on the coffee table.

"You can start eating. I have to change my clothes before I leave," I say.

"You sure?"

"Yes," I say, evading his eyes.

"Okay," he says softly. "Make sure nobody follows you. It's really important."

"Don't worry. I will. Is there anything you want me to tell them?" I ask, managing to keep my voice even.

"Tell Sara to take the money and leave town for a couple of weeks. Tell her I'm okay. I'll call her as soon as I can."

"Why can't you tell her yourself?" I ask abruptly.

His eyes meet mine.

I hold his gaze.

"She, um..."

He stops, weighing his words.

“She doesn’t know what I’m doing, and I want to keep it that way. I don’t want to pull her into my mess. If she finds out something bad has happened to me, she won’t leave without me. And she and Emma must get out of town. The men who hurt me are after them as well.”

“I see,” I murmur faintly.

“Also, tell them that, um... I love them,” he says, visibly affected.

More pain claws at my chest.

Swiftly, he pulls his gaze away, and I walk out of the living room, a mess.



THE DOOR CRACKS OPEN, and a young woman fills my view.

Surprise beams on her face while a smile tilts her lips. It’s only briefly before concern slides over her face.

She’s about my height, her face framed by blonde locks. Her eyes and lovely features speak of classic, timeless beauty.

A sleeveless dress hugs her silhouette, a blue sweater casually draped over her shoulders. Mascara brings out her blue eyes, a nude gloss setting off her lips.

“Yes?” she asks.

“Jaden... Jaden...”

A crystalline voice comes from the floor.

“Who is this?” I ask, bending at the waist as the little girl crawls up and hides behind her mom’s skirt.

“This is Emma,” the woman says, lifting the little girl in her arms.

Emma gives me a sweet smile, her adorable face, a carbon copy of Jaden’s. His eyes, his nose, the pout.

I take a long breath and stretch my hand to her mom, my heart leaping to my throat.

“I’m Senna. Jaden sent me.”

She studies me, intrigued.

Her hand meets mine. Hesitantly.

“Sara... Please, come in,” she says politely.

I enter the foyer.

She shows me to the living room and sets Emma on her feet, the little girl gripping her mother’s skirt while looking up at me.

The house is small but cozy, crammed with toys, plants, and a few pieces of furniture. The living room opens to the kitchen.

The place is spotless. Pots and pans sit on the stove, filled with freshly cooked food. The smell tickles my nostrils.

Textbooks and a small laptop sit on the kitchen table.

“Going to school?”

“I’m trying. It’s not that easy,” she says, smiling as Emma brings her small hands to a bookshelf and tugs at a big book.

Sara sweeps her off her feet and puts her on a blanket on the floor.

“Do you want something to drink? Coffee? Tea?”

“Nothing for me. Thank you.”

She invites me to take a seat before walking into the kitchen and pouring a cup of coffee for herself.

She saunters back to the living room and slips into a chair across from me.

“Is he okay?” she asks, concerned.

“Yes, he is.”

“Where is he?”

Suspicion threads through her voice.

“He got caught up in a work project.”

“He did?” she asks incredulously.

I quickly remember his words and realize I need to make this story as plausible as possible.

“What kind of work?” she asks.

My mind spins different thoughts for a moment, trying to find an answer. I glance down, my gaze landing on a stack of crayons and a paper pad.

My eyes fall on the sketches.

The image of a baby bear comes into focus, and Jaden’s name scribbled at the bottom.

“Illustrations for a children’s book.”

Sara’s smile drops from her face.

Cringing inwardly, I swiftly pull my mouth shut. Shit. I must’ve gotten this all wrong.

Next, her eyes brighten with a smile.

“Are you serious? That’s great!” she says.

“Yes. It really is,” I murmur, more confidently this time.

“I always told him he’s good at drawing,” she says.

“He works with a children’s book author, and he wants me to give you this,” I say, pulling out the wad of cash.

Her smile fades.

“What is this?”

“An advance.”

She takes the stash of cash and looks at it suspiciously.

“That’s a lot of money,” she says.

“He works with a successful author.”

She lifts her gaze to me.

“So where is he?”



“At the author’s vacation home. They are working really hard to wrap it up and meet the deadline.”

“I see...” she says, not entirely convinced.

“He also suggested you should take a couple of weeks off and go on vacation. You deserve it, he said. He thinks Emma would love it too, and he’ll send more money as soon as possible. He also said the sooner you leave, the better you’ll be.”

“Okay,” she says, a bit overwhelmed.

“Oh... I also have something for Emma.”

I push out of my chair and head to the exit. She follows me and watches me from the doorway as I pull the truck open and scoop out a Llama ride-on toy.

“No...” she says, grinning.

“Oh, yes,” I say, smiling.

“It looks like a pony.”

“It comes with a blanket too. And reins.”

“She’ll love it,” she says, the smile flashing through her eyes, making her look even younger, reminding me so much of him.

“I love it,” I say. “Too bad they don’t make them for adults.”

I give her the toy while I carry another gift inside.

“Horse... horse,” Emma murmurs, clapping her hands.

“It’s not a horse,” Sara says.

“It’s a llama,” I say.

“What’s a llama?” Emma asks, mumbling her way through the word.

“It’s a camel...” I say.

“What’s a camel?”

Sara looks at me.

I shake my head.

“I’m out of ideas,” I say, laughing.

Luckily, it doesn’t take long before Emma straddles her toy and forgets about the question.

“This is for you,” I say, handing Sara her gift.

She takes the box, her smile vanishing.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, no longer grinning.

“No... No,” she says apologetically.

“Open it.”

She slips her fingers inside and tears the wrapping paper open. Her hand flies to her mouth.

“Oh... Are you serious?”

“Is it okay?” I ask, unable to read her reaction.

“A tablet?” she asks, filled with disbelief.

“Yes? Is it good?”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

She hugs me. Taken by surprise, I freeze and melt at the same time.

She pulls away, examining, curious.

“Are these from you or Jaden?”

“Him,” I say without flinching.

She shifts her gaze to Emma and then back to me.

“Thank you again,” she says, a bit conflicted.

“It was nice meeting you, Sara,” I say. “I have to go now.”

“Sure... Emma? Let’s say goodbye to Senna.”

“Goodbye,” Emma mumbles, holding her little hands up in the air, and waving at me with half of her body.

I kneel and open my arms. She comes to me and hugs me. A tiny, warm body. Her skin is soft like silk, her hair smells like flowers and her eyes... Jaden’s eyes.

A feeling I've never experienced before pours into my heart.

She reminds me of me as I used to be, Jaden, and all the beautiful things in this world. My chin begins to tremble as tears well up in my eyes.

Reluctantly, I pull away from them.

Sara takes Emma in her arms, and both accompany me as I walk to the door. Once I step outside, I turn to her one more time and look her in the eyes.

"Please leave tonight," I say seriously. Her eyes search mine. "He wants you to be somewhere safe."

"Okay," she says.

"He'll call you."

I step down the stairs, and before I reach the car, her voice rings behind me.

"Senna?"

"Yes?"

I turn to her.

"Who are you?"

I smile.

"A friend."

I wave them goodbye as I climb into my car, my eyes taking a snapshot of them, their image lodged in my memory.

# S ENNA

TEN DAYS LATER

“SENNA?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you want me to publish it?”

Harper’s voice rings in my earpiece.

“No, no... I’ll do it,” I say.

I curl my fingers around the glass and bring the iced coffee to my lips.

I take a sip. She starts singing a carol.

“Are you serious?” I ask, setting the glass on the table.

She laughs, entertained.

A gust of wind tousles my hair. Running my fingers through my locks, I comb it all back. The temperature is mild, and it’s a pleasure to be outside.

I push my laptop to my knees and lean back in my chair, glancing at Jaden, who’s lounging not far from me.

His eyes roam over the pool.

“Perhaps you should take the week off. It’s Christmas, after all,” she says.

“Maybe you should mind your own business,” I mumble under my breath.

“You sound distracted,” she says, a smile tinging her voice.

“Mind your own business,” I say, stifling a chuckle.

Her laughter fills my ear.

“Is the hot pool boy there?”

“Mm-hmm,” I say, glancing absently at the guy who flexes his muscles while cleaning the pool.

Smoothly, I shift my gaze and study Jaden’s body.

As my eyes run down, tingles roll between my thighs. I haven’t touched a man since, well... I was with him the last time.

Raising his eyes from his tablet, he shoots me a questioning look.

He looks pissed.

“You can’t talk, can you?” Harper asks.

I bend my knees and pull my laptop higher, hiding my face and eyes.

From time to time, I peek at Jaden.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Is he close?”

“Uh-huh,” I murmur.

Jaden’s eyes flick at the pool boy, then glare at me.

Oh... Shit.

That’s what this is.

“So it’s the pool boy...” Harper says.

“I have to go now. I’ll talk to you later,” I say to her as Jaden shifts his eyes to me, his eyebrows lifting slowly.

The pool boy walks by before vanishing inside the house.

Without a word, Jaden rises to his feet and strides away.

“Jaden?”

I toss the laptop on the chair and rush after him. I catch up with him as he enters the house.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

He cuts his way across the living room and swiftly veers into the bedroom.

I follow him, a bad feeling crawling up my chest.

Frozen, I stand in the doorway, waiting for him to exit the closet.

A few moments pass.

He emerges, clothed.

He wears a t-shirt, jeans, and boots. He drops all the clothes I bought for him on the bed and snatches his jacket from a chair.

He shrugs it on and heads to the door.

I block his way.

“I need to go, Senna,” he says firmly as he pulls a cigarette out of his jacket.

He slides it between his lips.

Without lighting it up, he shoves his hands into his pockets, waiting for me to move out of his way.

I stare at the cigarette and then at his lips as they curve slightly around the filtered end.

It wasn't easy having him around and not being able to touch him. We slept in different rooms and tried to keep ourselves occupied.

I worked.

He read a lot.

We never talked about the night I found him bloodied or about Sara and Emma. I never asked because I didn't want to pry, and he never offered me an explanation.

He talked to Sara on the phone several times but never shared a thing with me.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“Home.”

“Where's that?” I hurl at him, barely containing my fury.

“Where you delivered the money.”

My jaw clenches as tears wash my eyes.

“Who are they?”

My voice trembles.

My shoulders quiver.

He locks my eyes— cold and distant—the sadness I have seen in him so many times dripping in his gaze.

That's a bad omen.

“That's not your business,” he says curtly, his words tearing into me.

Breathing out a long exhale, I slowly slide my hand off the doorknob.

He pulls the cigarette out of his mouth, the tension dissipating from his features.

“Listen... I'm grateful for what you've done for me, and I know why you did it. I know you've risked a lot. Of all the people know, you are the only one I'd ask for help. Although I didn't want you to see me down. It wasn't my choice.”

He pauses, the tears in my eyes registering with him.

“I'll pay for my stay and my clothes,” he says in a softer voice.

“You need the last check-up. You've heard my doctor,” I say, foolishly hoping I can make him stay.

“He gave me a clean bill of health,” he says, his lips curved into a smile. “I don’t need that last exam as much as you don’t need those hot dicks doing work for you.”

His burst of frustration brings a grin to my lips.

“No way... You’re jealous.”

“I’m not,” he says, wiping the smile away from his lips. “I need to leave. It doesn’t have anything to do with you,” he says as if that makes me feel any better.

“What are you going to do?”

“That’s my fucking business,” he says, a flash of anger flitting through his eyes.

“You’re not doing that again,” I say, unable to get a grip on myself.

I’m perfectly aware I’m on a slippery slope with him, and if there’s anything to make him pull away from me even faster, it’s me having ideas on how he is supposed to live his life.

“Don’t do that,” he says.

“Do what?”

“Acting all protective and shit.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you fucking are,” he says, shooting a nasty glare at me. “I don’t need your sympathy.”

“It’s not that,” I murmur.

“That’s exactly what it is. You have your own problems and need to deal with them first. Fucking men like Nick to pull them out of a maze or trying to straighten me up won’t do it for you. It won’t make you feel better. It will always remind you of what is wrong with you.”

“Don’t say that...” I murmur.

“It’s the truth,” he says, adjusting his voice. “I hate being on the streets. It’s not as if I like it, but I need to find my way out of that shitty situation on my own.”



“At least, stay here...” I murmur. “You can do whatever the hell you want. You don’t have to risk your life going back or living at your old place.”

He takes a long breath and runs his fingers through his hair, his eyes drowning in sorrow.

He looks away.

“I can’t stay,” he finally says.

It sounds like a sentence.

“Only for a few weeks until things get settled and you figure something out.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

He pushes my arm to the side and slips by me. I catch up with him in the foyer.

“Or you can work for me,” I throw at him, pretty much exhausting all possibilities.

He stops. I turn to stone a couple of steps behind him.

He turns around and closes the distance between us, fury blazing in his eyes.

“And do what? Join the line of dicks who dust your furniture, make your eggs and clean your pool?”

I cringe.

“No. That’s not what I had in mind.”

He lets out a dark chuckle, sarcasm glinting in his eyes.

He tips his head back and looks down his nose at me, crushing me with his stare.

“I’m not fucking you for money.”

Clearly, I’m getting nowhere with this.

Fucking me for money was not what I had in mind, but I might as well go with it.

“What’s so bad about it? Money is good, and you seem to enjoy it as much as I do. That’s why you need to go back there anyway. So why not make more money in a more pleasurable

way without the risks?" I ask, my pitch making his eyes go wide with surprise.

I know I'm risking a lot, and with him, it's probably everything, but I don't have much of a choice, do I?

"I'm clean, and you're clean. It can't get safer than that," I say, cold as him.

His eyes glint with deep-seated pain.

He curves his lips into a dark, faint grin, and I brace myself.

"You already have a whore on a retainer... or maybe more. You don't need another one. Plus, I don't do that," he says, throwing words at me like bullets.

It's my turn to feel the grip of sarcasm.

"Really? Then, what exactly is it that you do, Jaden?" I sneer.

Frustrated, I clasp my hips.

"Huh? It's sucking cock in the back alleys any better?"

"I'm not sucking cock..." he barks, a vein pulsing in his corded neck.

"Whatever the hell you do... And then almost got you killed."

"That was a woman," he deadpans, and my mouth falls open.

"A woman??"

My voice breaks, filled with disbelief.

"Are you kidding me? You said you weren't fucking women for money."

"Not anymore," he says.

His expression changes, a shred of dark amusement moving through his eyes.

"What's so fucking funny?"

"You... Being angry."

“Ugh... You’re driving me crazy, Jaden.”

He tips his chin down, his lips lined with a smirk. I feel like slapping him.

I crush a retort and take a deep breath before raising my hands and gesturing.

“Okay... Okay. What about this? You work for me. Legit work. No sex.”

He lifts an eyebrow, the temperature of his smile rising, giving me an instant flash.

“You know it’s not gonna work,” he says as if reading my mind. “We both know it. And you said the same thing when you hired me.”

“It will fucking work. I’ll make it work. I promise.”

He ponders.

“What kind of work?”

“I’ll teach you how to do what I’m currently doing.”

He looks at me. Serious. And surprised.

“What about Harper?”

“She’ll keep her job. You’ll work with her and do my work. I’ll show you how. This way, I can focus on other projects.”

“And you stay out of my life?” he asks incredulously.

This is the hardest promise to make and also the least likely to keep.

“Yes. I’ll stay out of your life. You can fuck anyone you like, hopefully not for money,” I say.

He cocks his head to the side.

“Let me rephrase it. I’ll stay out of your life, and you stay out of mine. What about that?” I toss at him.

He nods, his eyes gleaming with a mysterious smile.

“One rule, though. We don’t bring people here,” I say.

“Okay,” he says, his quick answer taking me by surprise.

“It’s two grand a week, board and food included, incidentals covered.”

His eyebrows arch slowly. That’s a lot of money for a job, and it’s the same amount I’d pay anyone else to do it, yet he doesn’t seem impressed, or perhaps, I can’t read him.

“It’s less than you make with fucking someone... I’m sorry. But it’s a job. That’s what you wanted.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he says.

“Good. Here...”

I pass by him, snatch a key from the counter and push through the door, entering the garage. He follows me.

Several cars fill the space. A couple of SUVs and a few classic cars. I walk across the room and stop next to a vintage Camaro similar to mine.

He swivels his head, taking in the cars.

“Do you know how to fix them?” I ask.

He nods.

I hand him the key.

“This is yours if you fix it. For any parts, I’ll cover the cost. It needs extensive work. I kept postponing taking it to a mechanic, leaning toward selling it as is. So if you can make it yours, I’d be more than happy to sell it to you for a nominal fee.”

His eyes rove over the Camaro.

“You’re quite the collector...” he says.

It’s hard to miss the glaring undertone.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Do we have a deal?”

He slips the key back into my hand.

“Give me some time. I’ll think about it.”

I look at him, my mouth agape.

“I promise,” he says seriously.

His phone rings.

He takes the call.

“Yeah... Okay. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I check the time on the wall clock. It’s twelve o’clock. Sharp. And then it dawns on me.

Oh, fuck.

I can’t believe this. It’s a scheduled pickup. He must’ve planned this all along.

How stupid can I be?

“Who was that?”

He wags his finger at me, grinning.

“Don’t do that, Senna.”

He leans into me and places a soft kiss on my cheek that turns me to mush before he tears away.

“I’ll let you know about the car and everything else. If you don’t hear from me till then, Merry Christmas.”

Dumbstruck, I stare at him as he swaggers away, my heart crumbling in my chest.



JADEN

THE OCEAN STRETCHES in front of us, white crests breaking against the shore.

The breeze sweeps the beach, tousling my hair and ruffling my towel.

“Jaden... Jaden...”

Emma shoots her arms in the air and runs to me, waddling like a baby penguin. As soon as she hits the sand, her small feet sink, bringing her to a halt.

She bends at the waist and struggles to regain her balance, looking at me on the cusp of crying.

I sit upright.

“You can do it, baby. Come on. Easy... Come on. I’m here. I’ll catch you.”

I open my arms. She pulls up and steps gingerly toward me under my attentive eyes. She gets closer, and just as I’m about to praise her for her effort, she loses her balance.

Her arms flop back while her eyes pull wide open. I leap up and catch her. She giggles as I lift her up, her sand-coated fingers brushing my face.

I feel the grains of sand between my teeth.

“Smart move, Emma...”

Amused, she snickers, her hands assaulting me, smearing sand and salty water all over my face.

“That is not funny,” I say, feeding her laughter.

Grinning, I pull her into my chest and lean back in the lounge chair. I start to tickle her, and she begins to laugh, her eyes sparkling with joy.

“What did she do?”

Sara’s voice rings behind us.

She sinks into a chair next to me, glancing at us.

“Oh, I see...” she says. “Give her to me.”

“No, it’s fine,” I murmur.

“At least, let me clean your face,” she says.

She wipes my face with a small towel. As she does that, Emma presses her hands on my cheeks again, her chest rocking with laughter.

“Maybe you should start with her hands...” I say, smiling.

“Yeah... No kidding. Stay still, sweetie,” Sara says as she cleans Emma’s fingers.

Minutes later, Emma lays her cheek on my chest and closes her eyes, her breath rolling steadily as she drifts off to sleep.

Sara checks the time.

“We should go now, so she naps in the afternoon.”

“Relax... Let her sleep. We’ll go when she wakes up. Otherwise, she gets all fussy.”

She tosses the napkin into her beach bag and stretches her bikini-clad body in the lounge chair.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, she looks at the horizon.

Seagulls quarrel on the beach over food. The air is warm and dry this time of year, and the water is slightly cooler than last summer.

“Some days, I wish I didn’t have to go back,” she says, looking in the distance.

I study her in silence.

She glances at me.

“I know it’s not possible, but I wish it were,” she says softly, a nostalgic grin curving her lips.

“What if it were possible?”

She searches my eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“You and Emma may be able to stay here for a while,” I say quietly.

“How?” she asks, baffled.

“I just received, um... a job offer.”

“You don’t sound very convinced. Besides, what kind of job can pay for all of this?”

Tilting her chin, she motions to the beach and the rental house not far from us.

“It’s a job that pays well and a few times over what I used to make. You’d be able to move here with Emma if that’s what you want.”

“Where would you be?”

“Back in town. Room and board are included, so I don’t have to worry about that.”

Her eyebrows move up.

“What kind of job is it?” she asks suspiciously.

“It’s a regular job. Computer stuff. I’d be able to come here regularly to see you and Emma. It’s safer for both of you. The ocean and the beach are nearby. People are friendly. The place is quiet. ”

She thinks about it.

“Is that a solid offer?”

I smile.

“It is for now... But it’s like anything else. It can change at any moment. I’m not making long-term plans with it, but it’s a good opportunity to make this move. I’d rather see Emma in a safer neighborhood than stuck in some crowded part of the city.”

“Me too. But if you say you’re not sure...”

“I’m not saying that. If anything changes, I’ll figure something out. I know it’s hard to depend solely on me, but I’ll make it work. When Emma gets older and you finish school, you’ll have a job, and things will improve. You’ll see.”

Emma shifts her body just as I finish talking. She lifts her head, sleepy eyes staring at the tip of my nose.

I motion to Sara.

“Time to go, girls.”



# S ENNA

“GOOD EVENING, MS. LLOYD. MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

Evading the hotel clerk’s eyes, I snatch the key card, mumble an answer and veer away from the concierge desk.

The click-clacking of my heels resonates across the lobby, all the way to the elevator, turning a few heads.

Way to go, Senna.

Admittedly, I’ve gone crazy with this outfit.

Had they not known who I was, they would’ve thrown me out of the hotel.

The flared, black mini-skirt barely covers my butt, and the matching garters peeking from underneath could quickly get me arrested.

A push-up bra spills half of my chest out.

A fitted, button-down shirt ties at my waist, exposing my belly button, while a cropped leather jacket drapes over my shoulders, stopping short of my waist.

The knee-length, high-heeled, black boots dispel all doubts in case there were any.

Everyone I have crossed paths with—including the reception desk clerk—knows exactly why I’m here and what

I'm after.

I may as well have it tattooed on my forehead. Balls included. All I'm missing is the whip and the cuffs.

I'm sure Abel took care of that.

Dark like my outfit, I take the elevator up, glaring at my reflection. I look as if I fell off a Halloween bus.

Whatever. I don't care. I'm here to get my fix.

Anything to take my mind off him. Anything to stop my teeth from grinding, my hands from curling into fists, and my mind from spinning uselessly.

Anything to bottle up my fury.

He played me. He fucking did. And so fucking well.

Classic bait and switch. How can I be so blind and stupid?

He picked a fight over something stupid—so typical—and pointed to my problems—again, not surprisingly so—while he was actually planning to get out of my house.

He could've told me without setting me up.

Hours after he left, I worked out to the point of exhaustion before I went to a shooting range, and on my way back, I almost wrecked my car.

I'm actually more mad at myself than at him.

One of the things I've always planned for was not to need other people. Men in particular. Hot men are right there at the top of my list.

I can't stand that feeling. Needing someone so badly you lose your sleep and can't eat because your mind is hacked by that person.

Why do I have to need him that badly?

But this will end. Right here. And right now.

Balancing on my four-inch heels, I slip out of the elevator and strut to the room. The door opens before I get the chance to swipe my key card, a strong arm pulling me in.

Fast and smooth, Abel shackles my hands at my back and blindfolds me. Following my instructions, he doesn't say a word.

He crashes my back against the wall and pulls my shirt out of my skirt, and then cups and kneads my breasts. Pressing his hard body into mine, he trails the side of my neck with his lips, his erection rubbing against me.

I'm cold as stone.

But I can't have this right now, and I know the remedy for it.

Swiftly, I bring back the memory of him. His hands on me, and his cock rubbing against me while his hot breath rolls over my lips.

For a few seconds, it all goes well, and something tightens in my belly. Not strong enough to hold.

Damn it. It's worse than I thought. What pleasure I have drawn from Abel is now gone.

He slides one hand to my neck and the other up my skirt. My body turns to ice as if I'm under some spell. The memory of Jaden withers away, and nothing seems to work.

And he knows it.

He feels it.

"Is there something wrong, Senna?"

He stops and pulls my blindfold away.

I glance at him.

"I'm sorry, Abel," I say softly, my voice on the cusp of tears.

He stares at me and then curls his arms around me, comforting me, while I burst into a quiet sob.

He slowly strokes my hair.

"Do you want to talk?" he asks, and my chest hurts.

Tears start streaming down my cheeks as I slowly shake my head. His eyes are soft. His touch is gentle. He offers me

all the comfort that I need, and yet, there's nothing I can give him.

My blood screams for the other man.

As if I needed another curse.

Another sin.

Another pain.

Another man to rip me open.

Another soul to put me in a cage.

"No," I finally say.

He wipes the tears away from my face and kisses my cheek tenderly as I wrap my arms around him and hold him tightly.

Half an hour later, I leave the hotel room, my hair a mess, my lipstick gone, and dark circles around my eyes.

Holding my head low, I slither out of the lobby and strut across the parking lot.

Swiftly, I enter my car, turn on the ignition, and back away, heading home.

I roll the window down.

The cold, drizzling rain reminds me of the northern winters. It's Christmas Eve, and the streets are empty.

Here and there, I drive past homes beaming with lights and sparkling decorations, the silhouettes of people shifting behind the windows.

Sadly, this evening will go down as one of the low points of my life.

My life was never perfect, but there were things I had under control. Despite feeling lonely at times, my emotions were always in check.

I drive home, crippled by sadness.

As the gates slide open and my car rolls onto the driveway, hundreds of flickering Christmas lights fill my sight, greeting

me with a display of colors.

It took hours of work to make my house look like a fairy tale. It wasn't even my idea. It was Harper's.

To lift my spirits, she said.

A tall Christmas tree gleams in the window.

I step out and brace the top of the car with both hands, a nauseating feeling creeping up my throat.

"You okay?"

Startled, I jolt and turn around. A dark silhouette pushes off the side door and strides toward me.

Not far from him, I notice his bike.

"How did you get in?"

He motions to the gates.

"You should've changed the passcode," he says, walking into a patch of light.

Rain shimmers in his hair.

His eyes narrow as he takes me in, flashing an amused smile.

He hides his hands in his pockets, his tongue flicking the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"My fucking luck," he says, pulling the cigarette out.

His eyes go down my legs.

"I thought you were home," he says in a different voice, flicking his gaze up and locking my eyes.

A cocky smile tugs at his lips.

"Who knew you'd go out on Christmas Eve, especially in this kind of weather," he says, taking in my outfit, entertained.

I jolt out of the surprise and disbelief, shaking off the spell while recollecting the last hour or so of sheer misery.

Pushing back bad words, I wave him off and head to the house.

Careful not to break a heel, I strut to the door. His eyes drop to my heels, his bottom lip slowly rolling beneath his teeth as he barely contains his laughter.

“You could’ve called,” I say, irritated.

“I wanted to be a surprise,” he says, his eyes roving over my ass as I enter the house. “It looks like you surprised me,” he says, following me inside.

I spin around fast. He raises his eyes. They are still glinting with amusement.

Glaring at him, I turn the ceiling lights on.

He shoots his hands up in the air, chuckling.

“Wow. Is there a slut convention in town, and I haven’t been invited?”

“Ha, ha,” I sneer, throwing my keys on the counter and the jacket on the sofa.

The jacket slips off the couch. Without giving it a second thought, I bend at the waist and snatch it off the floor, flashing my butt.

“Jesus, Senna... Garters? Fuck me heels? Who did you fuck?” he asks, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Calmly, he lights up his cigarette, his jacket still on.

Glowering, I run my hand through my hair and comb it all back before pulling my shirt out of my skirt and flicking the buttons open.

“I didn’t fuck anyone,” I say, frustration bleeding into my voice.

“You clearly need it...” he says.

He exhales the smoke to the side, his eyes weighing me.

“Badly,” he adds.

“No. I don’t need it.”

“Then why’d you strip for me?”

He bites the inside of his cheek, crushing a smile, and then he flicks his tongue over his lip. He lets his cigarette rest in the ashtray as he peels off his jacket.

My eyes fall on him.

A slim-fit T-shirt clings to his torso, his jeans hugging his hips and package.

He rests his elbow on the counter while shoving the other hand into his pocket. Leaning back, he crosses his legs, his bulge pushing against his fly.

I get tense and hot.

Instantly, I get annoyed.

“I don’t strip for you. My shirt is soaked,” I say.

“Yeah... Mm-hmm. Sure, babe.”

Throwing him a glare, I open the door to the washer room and throw my shirt into a hamper.

His eyes brighten with a wolfish smile.

“So what happened with your fuck date?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

He thrusts his pecs out, snagging my gaze. An insolent grin stretches across his lips.

“The man couldn’t deliver?” he suggests, not really asking.

I stop in front of him, itching to slap the smile off his face.

Gripping my hips, I clench my jaw, trying to contain my fury.

“It had nothing to do with him.”

“No?”

He tosses me a cheeky smile.

Frustrated, I throw my hands up in the air and walk around the counter.

“You want something to drink?” I ask.

He sways his head from side to side.

I open a cabinet and pull out a bottle and a glass.

“I thought you were a wine girl,” he says as I fill the glass with ice and as much scotch as I can cram in.

I toss it back and slam the glass on the counter.

“You don’t know much about me,” I say, wincing as the alcohol burns its way down my throat.

His eyes twinkle with mischief.

“You need to get laid so badly,” he says.

Lowering my eyes, I start washing my glass.

“Why are you here, Jaden?” I ask brashly, shooting him a glance.

His gaze lifts slowly from my breasts.

He doesn’t answer.

Instead, he picks up his cigarette, takes a drag, and stubs it out. His smile fades as he exhales the smoke in a soft stream.

Poised, he grabs his jacket and strolls out of the kitchen.

“Jaden??”

Blind with fury, I march behind him.

He turns around fast, and our bodies touch for a moment, my skin burning as if catching on fire.

I step back, my eyes floating over him.

I’m so losing this battle.

I feel so lousy, yet the words fall from my lips.

“Don’t leave,” I say.

He ponders, his eyes changing colors, looking silver between his long lashes.

There’s no smile on his face, and a muscle pulses in his jaw.

I can’t see a damn hint on his face, but my gut tells me he is a second away from leaving for good.



“Please,” I say.

Never in my life have I felt so torn.

A few moments of silence dance around us. They feel like hours. He tosses his jacket back on the armchair and, with a few strides, erases the space between us.

I retreat until my back meets the washroom entrance.

His palms slide onto the wooden door guarding my back.

“I won’t leave if you tell me why it hasn’t worked out for you this evening,” he says quietly.

My eyes dart back and forth, my throat tight with emotions.

“Answer me, Senna,” he says, still quiet but firm.

I don’t see a way around this.

As I struggle to come up with an explanation, he slides his hand down to my wrap skirt and pops the only button open. The skirt drops to the floor.

His eyes dip as he takes in the small strip of fabric barely covering my slit and the garters outlining my waist and hips.

“It’s not working since we, um...”

He flicks his eyes up.

“Fucked?”

“Yes,” I say. “It no longer works.”

He looks down again.

His fingers trace my garter slowly, his knuckles brushing my skin. I press my thighs together, my core pulsing.

Softly.

He runs his fingers between my legs, the back of his hand sliding over the small band of fabric.

Tingles swirl between my thighs.

“Why’d you meet him?”

“I wanted to forget.”

His eyes pull up to me.

“To forget what?”

“You,” I say in a broken voice.

His eyes drop to my lips.

He pulls his hand away from me and steps back, a wall of coldness rising between us.

My legs are about to give in.

His expression changes.

“The only reason I am here,” he says flatly, “is that I want to work for you... if the offer is still on the table.”

“Yes, it is,” I say, barely breathing.

He muses over something, not looking overly excited. Not even pleasantly surprised.

“Okay,” he says dryly and pauses.

My pulse throbs in my neck.

“There’s only one thing,” he says, studying me. “I can’t afford to mess things up.”

“How can you mess things up?”

“Fucking you will mess with your brain. And mine,” he says bluntly.

“I’m not asking you to do anything. Our deal stands. I will not offer you money for sex or make the job offer contingent upon sexual favors. The job is yours. Your life is yours. But I don’t want you to hold back if and when you feel differently. I don’t want that tension between us. I already told you I’m not looking for romance. And you made it clear to me, you weren’t either...”

He listens attentively, his eyes delving into mine.

He purses his lips and gives me a slow once-over that spreads a firestorm over my skin.

“For that to happen...” he says and lifts his gaze. “I need to fuck you the way I want and when I want it.”

I nod.

“The way you want it... When you want it,” I say, wheezing.

“Turn around,” he says, taking me completely by surprise.

My eyebrows flick up with a questioning look.

He cocks his head to the side, daring me to comment.

This battle is already lost. Let's hope I win the war.

Silently, I spin around.

“Put your hands on the wall.”

I do as I'm told, and then I feel his palm gliding down my back.

He traces my spine until he meets the swell of my butt.

Slowly, he trails the tight curves of my rear. His touch spurs tingles between my legs.

I arch my back and push my backside out, asking for more of his touch.

He may be a giver, and I'm a hell of a taker.

His hand goes lower, his fingers brushing the fabric between my legs, now damp from my arousal. Teasingly slow, he rubs my entrance and my folds.

Goosebumps spread over my shoulders, his touch wreaking havoc inside me.

He brings the other hand to my chest and slips his fingers inside my bra, cupping my left breast.

His touch is soft and paced, as if he analyzes every piece of me. As if learning how my body works.

Deftly, he flicks the front buckle open and peels my bra off.

He pulls my thong to the side, his fingers sliding straight into my slick, wet flesh.

I push a moan back, only a silent gasp making it to my lips.

He leans in, his hot breath rolling over my shoulder, his lips coming closer to my ear.

“How does it feel?” he asks, his heat traveling to me.

His fingers move between my legs from my entrance to my clit. He keeps stroking me, spurring more wetness in my core.

I part my legs— even more—relishing the pleasurable sensation.

My skin burns while my nipples turn to pebbles as his fingers enter me again.

My center throbs around him, warm and wet, ready for him. I absorb him with heightened intensity, from his scent of smoke and cologne to the warmth emanating from his skin.

His lips come to my ear again.

“See... It’s not that hard, babe,” he murmurs, his lips grazing my earlobe softly.

I could argue about how hard it was for me, but this is not the place or time.

His fingers move in and out, his breaths getting heavier.

I roll my hips against his touch, hungry to be filled.

He pulls away for a moment and tears the panties off. His zipper goes down with a metallic sound I feel on my spine.

Burning, I press my chest against the wall trying to cool my skin.

Waiting.

He pulls closer to me again.

One arm curls around me, the other easing his erection in. He enters me slowly and then drives his cock into me hard.

Oh... my...

He stills, and my core hugs him. Hot and wet. Filled with tension, pleasure, and a need for relief.

“Jaden...” I call softly, and he drives himself into me again, my body almost breaking.

We stay locked for another moment while I clench around his hardness.

“I knew you needed it badly,” he says, his lips touching my hair this time.

He pulls back and thrusts into me with force, both of us crashing against the wall. A curse escapes my lips.

His soaked fingers slip into my mouth.

“Stay quiet, baby.”

His voice courses through me, husky and raw, every fiber of my body turning into ecstasy.

He slams into me again and again while I close my mouth around his fingers and lose control fast.

He brushes my hair to the side, exposing the back of my neck, and runs his tongue over my skin, scraping my flesh with his teeth. I moan, indulging in that sensation, and he fills me up again, biting my shoulder.

My squeal ripples through the air, bouncing around the house. My pain is real and yet so pleasurable.

I shake and tremble, needing some relief.

He crushes me under his weight and keeps ramming into me, my breasts filling his palms, his fingers clamped on my nipples.

More fuel to my fire.

I close my eyes and squirm against him, curving my body, hungry for his thrusts. He keeps pounding me harder and faster before he suddenly stops.

I flick my eyes open, my breath catching.

I could kill someone right now.

His cock throbs inside me as I keep writhing against him, unable to stop my hips from grinding.

“Please...Please. Don't stop.”

His fingers slip between my folds.

“Wet like fuck,” he murmurs to himself, stroking my clit with his forefinger, tapping it gently.

It’s like the drop that breaks the dam. The tension peaks, and breaks in a split second, a crying moan leaving my chest.

He starts moving his hard meat into me again as I roll with a wave of mind-blowing pleasure, another orgasm barreling through me, and then he allows himself to ride that high with me.

# JADEN

“YOU’RE FUCKING PERFECT,” I mumble under my breath.

“What did you say?” she asks, swiveling her head to me, surprised.

Her hair is damp and stuck to her face, neck, and tits, her skin glimmering with sweat.

She’s still panting.

“Um... Nothing,” I say as I look at the swell of her ass grinding against my groin. The garters stretch across her flesh while my cock is buried deep between her legs.

I pull out, cum dripping.

“So you’re sure about this?” I ask.

“I don’t fuck anyone else anyway,” she clarifies through gasps.

Isn’t she the romantic?

“Well... I no longer fuck on the street. I’ll let you know when I fuck someone else,” I say, barely stifling a grin.

She spins around to see me.

She studies me for a second and rolls her eyes, frustrated.

“I can’t fucking wait,” she says.

“Hey.”

“All right... All right. I guess that’s what ‘exclusive’ means in your world,” she says.

I laugh.

“Yeah... That’s exclusive to me...”

Slowly on purpose, she sashays to the bathroom, letting me take her in. And I do it methodically, my gaze licking her tight rear, the space between her legs, her pert breasts, and the teasing sway of her hips.

The garters and the fuck me boots do her justice.

If she has more attire like this in her closet, it’s gonna be a hell of a task to keep my cock in my pants. She returns to the living room with two towels.

She wipes her smooth folds with one and hands me the other.

I tilt my head back, distracted by her hard nipples.

I stretch a sly smile.

“We should have a dress code,” I say.

She grins.

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. Heels and garters for you.”

Her eyes float over my torso before dipping to my groin.

“And nothing for you,” she says, her eyes glinting with mischief.

“No half-measures, huh?”

She shakes her head.

“I like everything about you,” she says seriously, examining me while I run the towel over my groin.

I slip my hand into the back of her hair and pull her to me. Our lips come dangerously close, not even an inch apart.



She blinks, surprised, unexpected softness coming to her eyes.

“I like the sound of that,” I say quietly.

She studies me for a moment, her soft grin brightening her eyes.

My lips curve into a smile.

“What is it, Senna?”

Her arms curl around me.

“You don’t need to do it roughly only for me.”

“I know, baby. I don’t do it only for you. I like it rough,” I say and softly brush her lips with mine, relishing the small gasp and the quiver of her mouth.

Her hands cup my face, her fingers threading through my hair. I drop the towel and snake my arm around her, my lips finding hers before locking them into a soft, gentle kiss. Her breaths shorten, her nipples pressing hard against my chest.

Reluctantly, I tear away, my gesture bringing desperation to her face.

“You’re so fucked, baby,” I say, grinning, as her hands still frame my face. “You have to let go of me, now. I have to go to the bathroom. All right?” I murmur in a mellow tone as if talking to Emma.

Her eyes glisten while she nods.

“I’m not going anywhere. Good?”

“Yes,” she says, a smile filling her eyes. I stare at her for a second, realizing that someone different is watching me through her eyes. Someone young and innocent.

A girl.

“Do you have any food in this big house of yours?” I ask as I walk away, heading to the bedroom.

“Nothing cooked, and it’s too late to order. ”

“That’s okay. We’ll find something.”



HER EYES LIGHT up as I slide the plates onto the coffee table.

“You don’t like anything formal, I gather,” I say, pointing at the small coffee table nestled between the couches.

“No, not really.”

“How come?”

“When I grew up, my family had everything done by the book. Our lives were dictated by norms and rules, and we were all bound by them. The women were supposed to behave in a certain way. Man too. Everything was planned and proper. I hated it.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, sitting next to her.

We start eating.

She takes small bites, tasting every morsel of food.

“This is good. How come you know how to cook?”

“I had no choice.”

“I never had the chance to learn. We always had chefs and servers.”

“The fucking life,” I murmur, mulling over her words.

She shifts her gaze to me, her whiskey eyes glinting in the soft light of the candles.

“It’s not what it seems to be,” she says.

“So what was so bad about it that it made you leave it all behind and go dumpster diving?”

Her face blanches, her eyes turning dull.

“I shouldn’t have asked you,” I say, quickly backing off.

“No... No. It wasn’t only one thing,” she says.

I flick my eyes at her while running a napkin over my lips. She looks at me, conflicted.

“Why can’t you tell me?” I ask.

“It’s not that easy...”

She sets the fork on the plate, breaking eye contact before raising her gaze back to me.

“You never told me about Sara and Emma...” she says.

I lean back against the couch.

“What would you like to know?”

“Who are they?”

“Who do you think they are?”

“They’re your family...” she says.

I give her a soft nod.

“I’m not sure about Sara... but Emma...”

She pauses as her voice gets shaky and her eyes get washed with tears.

“She looks exactly like you...” she says.

She averts her eyes, uselessly trying to hide her emotions.

“Is she your daughter?” she asks, flicking her gaze back at me.

Clashing thoughts roll over her face, mixed emotions flitting through her eyes. There’s hope, and a secret longing, a part of her hidden soul shining through. All bring so much beauty to her face.

I smile as I slowly shake my head.

“Sara is my sister, and Emma is my niece,” I say softly.

Her expression changes instantly.

She looks at me as if this piece of information has changed her entire life. Her eyes widen in surprise while her hand slides to her mouth.

“Oh, my God...” she murmurs, her eyes twinkling with a smile. “She looks just like you,” she says, washed with disbelief.

I nod.

“Yes. Emma and I look alike. And we both look like my mother.”

Her grin drops from her lips.

“Where is she? Your mother...”

“She passed away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“My father too.”

“Oh... I’m truly sorry,” she says, pushing her plate to the side. “Was it an accident?”

“Yeah... You can call it that.”

“How old is Sara?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Oh...”

“She got pregnant at seventeen. Emma’s almost three years old.”

She glances down for a moment.

“I thought so.”

“You like kids?” I ask.

She swings her eyes back to me.

A smile casts a glow over her face.

“I’d be lying if I said I do, but I like Emma. She’s the sweetest girl I’ve ever met.”

“She is, isn’t she?”

I smile at the memory of her. Senna’s eyes linger on me for a moment longer.

“You really love her,” she says.

“Yeah, I do. They have no one else... I don’t, either. I couldn’t bear it if anything bad happened to them.”

“What about Emma’s father?”

I sigh.

“Jacob died in a motorcycle accident. The bike I routinely ride was his. I rebuilt it and kept it, only because it was so dear to him. He was my best friend. Same age. We grew up together... Sara, Jacob, and I.”

I pause and glance down.

“How come you ended up...?”

She stops. I raise my eyes.

“On the streets?” I ask.

Silently, she nods.

“Life...” I mutter bitterly, slanting my gaze down for a moment. “Sometimes it’s not what you think it is. People pass judgments all the time,” I say, staring vacantly at a candle. “They think that those who end up on the streets, or at the bottom of anything, for that matter, are either lazy, stupid or make poor choices. It’s simpler than that, actually. Life can turn to shit any fucking moment. I never asked for this. But I knew it was either Sara or me, and I couldn’t let her do what I’m doing.”

I pull out a cigarette and light it up before tossing the lighter on the table.

I take a drag and let out the smoke.

“It’s hard to believe, but at one point, our lives were normal, like everybody else’s. We had two loving parents, a nice home, and friends. We went to school, and I didn’t care about money or anything else outside my little world. Within a year, we lost both parents. With no family left, it was either the streets or the foster homes. I was almost eighteen.”

“You said she doesn’t know.”

“We never talked about it. I had a job, but it didn’t bring enough money to make ends meet. The second job didn’t make a difference either. Not with two adults and a small child. Plus, I wanted her to get an education. It’s her dream. It was my mom’s. And Dad’s. For both of us, actually.”

Tears pool in her eyes again. I smile faintly, take another drag, and breathe the smoke out slowly before speaking again.

“Jacob’s accident came close to Emma’s first anniversary. It broke Sara to pieces. It broke me too. I never thought life could be such a fleeting thing. One day you have everything, and then the next day, you lose everything. That’s hard to understand, especially at that age. His death changed everything for her and me, and decisions needed to be made. I started to go out and come home with extra cash. She didn’t ask, and I didn’t volunteer the information. But if I came home cut and bruised, she’d figure out something happened. The money you gave me after we spent time together in the Keys... I couldn’t give it to her all at once. I didn’t have an explanation for it.”

She looks away, wiping a stray tear.

“I’m sorry.”

I shake my head slowly.

“You don’t have to be sorry. This shit happens all the time. And yes, people do make bad choices, but usually, it’s because they take stuff for granted and forget that, in a sense, all things are borrowed. The time we have, the other’s people time, and the love and kindness of someone. A child... Even a pet. Not all the people who are struggling are where they are because of poor choices. Sometimes, life just leaves you in the dust. And never gives you a second chance. That’s all,” I say dryly while putting my cigarette out.

Silence falls between the tall walls of her house.

A rumbling noise echoes in the distance, and then a bolt of lightning strikes close, followed shortly by the sound of rain splashing on the ground. A gust of wind blows a few drops through the cracked door.

She pushes to her feet.

“Leave it open,” I say.

“You like rain?” she asks.

“Yeah... I do.”

She lowers herself back on the couch, her gaze rooted to the wet windows.

Christmas lights look like smudged colors in the darkness.

We watch them in silence while listening to the sound of rain.

“This is an unusual Christmas,” she murmurs after a few more moments.

“It is, isn’t it?” I say, distracted, my mind wandering away like hers.

I push out of my seat and pick up the empty plates.

“Do you have anything sweet in your house?”

She flicks her gaze up as mine goes down.

“I guess not. You don’t look like you eat much,” I say.

“I do like to eat,” she argues. “What about ice cream?”

“That’ll do.”

She ambles to the refrigerator and pulls out a box.

Moments later, she strolls back to the couch and slides the cups filled with chocolate ice cream onto the table.

She hands me a spoon.

A few moments of silence pass as we taste it.

“What about you?” I ask. “Why did you leave home?”

Her expression changes, her face looking pale in the dimness.

“It wasn’t only one thing. Like you, I had a normal life. At least that’s how it looked to me. But unlike my sisters, I always had this rebel streak in me, so I had a hard time getting with the program. I was a good student. I enjoyed school, believe it or not, but as I grew older, I realized what kind of life awaited me. Everything was painstakingly planned by my family. My life, my career, and even my husband. He had to be vetted by them, most likely older, preferably wealthier than us. According to them, all I needed to do was to submit to him for the common good, to protect their interests. The husband

would've been nothing more than a proxy for my family. They had everything planned out for me when I hadn't even been kissed. They didn't know I wouldn't react well when forced into submission."

A smile tickles my lips. I shift my gaze away from her and focus on my dessert.

"That is different..." she murmurs.

I chuckle.

"Uh-huh."

"It is..." she says, and I bring my gaze to her.

Her grin makes her so beautiful.

"Sure, sweetheart. So, what's the deal with your sexual preferences?"

Her smile fades away.

"You're not gonna tell me, are you?"

Her eyes fill with dread, and my smirk falls from my lips.

A storm of emotions rolls over her face, dragging a dark shadow over her eyes.

"It's not..." she says, her voice breaking.

Panic sets in her eyes and her breaths become shallow. She tosses the cup on the table and darts outside. I push up to my feet and follow her.

I find her by the door, bent over, trying to breathe. Big drops of rain stain her thin T-shirt.

"You okay?"

She nods, wheezing.

My fingers splay across her back. She's warm beneath my touch, still breathing shallowly, but the rain is cold and unforgiving.

Her top is drenched.

"Let's go inside," I say.



Unable to unclench her jaw, she only shakes her head.

I slip my hand under her T-shirt. Goosebumps dot her skin beneath my touch. The new sensation snaps her brain out of the panic loop.

She straightens, her lips parted, her chest rising and falling, her long hair soaked with rain.

Raindrops fall from her eyelashes.

She blinks as I slip my hands to her face. She looks at me, wounded, broken, and defeated.

I've never seen a woman so strong and yet so vulnerable.

I stare at her and ponder whether I know enough about her to cross that line.

She looks at me in awe, her breaths steadying, her features slowly starting to relax.

“We should go inside,” I say quietly.

She blinks again, more rain falling from her lashes. No longer cold but warm like her tears.

END OF BOOK One



THANK you for reading JADEN (Dark Heart Series 1).

The story continues with WILD JADEN (Dark Heart Series 2).

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# WILD JADEN

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## DARK HEART SERIES BOOK TWO

# S ENNA

OUR DEAL IS WORKING.

It's been three weeks since he moved in and started to work for me.

He took over my job faster than I thought.

He's good at writing, coming up with headlines, posting reviews, and curating content. He shows a lot of discipline, likely stemming from the fact that he's been on his own and responsible for three people—two adults and a child—for some time now.

Harper adores him. The pool boy ignores him—at least he tries to. It's not that easy when he faces Jaden's scrutiny every time he shows up for work. I wish Jaden gave the poor guy a break.

No chance in hell. Seemingly, he's on a mission.

He's already made the males who work for me nervous just by lifting eyebrows and pursing lips.

I'd be surprised if they didn't think about quitting.

All in all, it's easier for those who don't have to face him, but not so much for the pool boy who comes to my house almost every other day.

Jaden picks on him to amuse himself, I suspect, and perhaps to drive me crazy—which he has succeeded—but once in a while, his territorial stance makes me smile.

Despite occasionally being a pain in the butt, I love having him around.

Worse. I got used to him.

And I think he likes being here with me as well.

We've done our best to make this work these past few weeks. He took over my tasks while I started to work with a web developing firm on a new app. My new schedule allowed me to catch up on my reading and work on other stuff.

We've never talked about what happened between us on Christmas Eve, let alone fuck. That's not to say sex is not on our minds. It sure is.

He also does all sorts of things that make me think about him all the time.

And yet, he also makes it clear it's not my call.

Aside from that, he spends almost every weekend with Sara and Emma while I stay home, pretending I don't miss him.

I don't ask him how he's spending his time, and he doesn't offer any answers on his own. This was—still is—part of our understanding, and I don't intend to challenge it.

I promised him to stay out of his life, and that's precisely what I'm doing. Although we have the freedom to see other people, I, for one, cannot do it right now, and he doesn't confess to doing it either.

Per our understanding, we keep our lives separate as much as we can.

We both spend our days at home, working, and also try to cohabit peacefully at night, not stepping on each other's toes.

He got his own room and fixed his car, and he's a pleasure to be around. In fact, he's too much pleasure, and that's the hardest part of all.

He knows it and doesn't make it easy for me at all.

He's playing with me, tossing teasers at me here and there— a flirting smile, an undertone, and a wink that makes me blush.

He tempts me with his body whenever he gets a chance, wearing clothes that make me want to peel them off with my teeth.

Jeans barely clinging to his butt, shorts redefining the meaning of package, T-shirts outlining his muscles—and that's if and when he remembers to clothe his chest.

I know every scar and mark on his torso better than my business, reminding me that I should try to mind my own business.

But as I said before, ignoring him is not an easy thing to do.

He does it on purpose to push me to the brink of desperation or perhaps to test my limits and the seriousness of my words.

But no matter how hard he tries, I'm not falling for his tricks. I stay busy with my work and make sure I keep my head straight.

Even so, my eyes always find him.

Like now.

Bringing the cup of coffee to my lips, I sip and glance out the window. The door to the backyard is open, and the AC is turned off for a change.

It's the middle of January, and it looks and feels like spring. The weather is beautiful, which is one of the main reasons tourists flock to Florida this time of year.

The air is warm and dry. The trees bloom, and a layer of colorful petals—pink and golden—cover the ground.

Torches outline the backyard, and strings of paper lights litter the trees, swaying slowly in the wind.

It's warm during the day and cooler in the evenings.

Once in a while, we experience a really cold night, but that's rather the exception. The days are shorter, sunny, and breezy, the palmetto leaves always dancing in the wind.

Sprawled in a lounge chair, Jaden talks on wireless earphones, his fingers running over the keyboard. The pool boy has finished up his work and is heading to the house.

Jaden throws him a glance.

It doesn't take long before he sees me peering through the window. His eyebrows pinch into a frown when he locks my eyes.

He yanks his earphones off and pulls the laptop shut before plopping it on the table and swaggering to the house just as the pool boy enters the living room.

"All done?" I murmur to him, rather distracted by Jaden, who makes a beeline for the same door.

"Yes," he says.

"I'll see you next week," I add, my gaze snagged by Jaden again.

Smoothly, the man vanishes through the main door as my eyes shift back to Jaden.

Tanned, ripped, and clad in a pair of swim trunks, he heads my way, his eyes sparkling with mischief. I lean back in my seat and hide my face, smiling behind my cup of coffee.

My eyes dip to his groin, his whole damn package shifting as he moves. The man sure has a way of making me hot like no one else. Biting the inside of his cheek, he pushes back a grin that flickers through his eyes.

He enters the house and graces me with a glance before striding across the living room and making a stop in the kitchen.

My lips purse into a smile as my gaze runs over him, and I start to muse.

It's more than good looks or a body made for sin that has me shackled to him.



It's the power flowing through his blood and coursing through his gaze. Bleeding into his touch and showing in his stance.

It's the way he runs his fingers through his hair and lifts his eyebrows. It's his smile, a wink, or the tipping of his chin, that makes me kneel in front of him.

To prove my point, he flicks his eyes at me and throws me a fiery smile that sends a wave of heat through my senses.

Briefly, I lower my eyes.

He's wild. And smart. And doesn't dwell or falter. He rarely—almost never—thinks about something twice and only does what he wants.

There's no room for compromise with him.

I raise my eyes again just as he stops in front of the refrigerator.

"I think your pool boy has a crush on you," he says, swinging the fridge door open.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, pretending I have no idea what he's alluding to.

Furtively, my gaze roams over him as his muscles shift beneath his skin, loaded with tension.

"He's been cleaning the damn pool for like... what? I don't know. Forever? It's the fourth time this week. It must be a really dirty pool, or he does a terrible job."

A smirk flashes across his lips.

He grabs a beer, yanks off the bottle cap with his ring, and takes a gulp.

"The pool is not dirty," I murmur. "And he does a great job."

He tips his head back as he takes another swig, barely stifling a laugh.

"Do I look like an amateur?"

I almost want to answer his rhetorical question, but I quickly get distracted, and my eyes start taking a detour over his body, painstakingly studying every tattoo, scar, and bumpy muscle.

He spreads his legs slightly, the ropes of his thighs pushing against his skin. His bulge thrusts forward, and his abs ripple with the motion, a stance that always makes me hot.

“Isn’t he like fifteen or something? Shouldn’t he be in school?” he sneers.

He twirls away from the fridge, a grin dancing in his eyes.

I give him a pointed look.

He seemingly can’t drop it, can he?

“He’s nineteen, and he’s getting his high school diploma online,” I say, a bit stiff. “He’s making some extra money on the side,” I rush to point out, trying to keep my face straight. “What’s your problem, Jaden?”

He flicks his hand up, his index finger pointing to his chest.

“My problem? I don’t have a problem,” he says, the slight frustration in his voice suggesting otherwise. “It’s your staff, sweetheart,” he says, his words and tone rubbing me the wrong way.

He takes another swig of beer, observing me with piercing eyes.

His lips curl into a sly smile.

“Why are you flustered all of a sudden?” he asks.

Why does this feel like a setup?

“I’m not flustered,” I say, trying to maintain my composure. I set the cup of coffee on the table, slide my tablet onto my knees, and shift my focus away from him, pretending I’m not flushed and sweating. “Why do you think he has a crush on me?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

“There you are.”

I lift my gaze.

“What? I’m just curious,” I say, smiling cunningly. “I want to know why.”

“I think you know why. But I’ll spell it for you, darling,” he says before running the tip of his tongue over his upper lip, making me stare for a moment.

“Every time you walk in the backyard, he loses his shit. He drops things and fumbles, his head spinning faster than a windmill. More so when you parade in your skimpy swimsuit. Then I can spot his hard-on from the street.”

I push back a chuckle.

“You have quite the imagination.”

His eyebrows tilt up.

“No, no. Trust me on this one. I know a horny male when I see one,” he says, no undertone in his voice.

“Okay. So what are you suggesting?”

“Diversifying would be nice,” he says, in a playful mood.

“Like what?”

“Hot women for a change,” he murmurs. “In skimpy clothing, if all possible,” he says, a cocky smirk creasing his lips.

“You are such an ass...”

“I’m entitled to entertainment as much as you are.”

I shift my gaze to my tablet.

“Is that what you think it is for me? A form of entertainment?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Why would you care anyway? You’re hotter than him.”

“Which proves my point.”

“Which is?”

“Men are entertainment to you.”

I flick my eyes to him.

I can't tell if he's joking or not.

"Don't you have some work to do?"

"I'm done."

"You weren't done when he got on your nerves."

A smile stretches across his lips.

"I finished earlier. I was working on something else."

"While keeping an eye on him."

He sets the bottle on the kitchen counter and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, something like that," he says, grinning.

I shift my focus to the screen, silence falling around us.

A faint rustle rolls in my ears as he pivots and looks out the window.

"Are you gonna be here on Saturday?" I ask.

"What's Saturday?"

I flick my gaze up. My eyes linger on him for a few more moments. He shifts his focus back to me, catching me staring blankly at him.

"What's Saturday?" he asks again.

"It's my birthday party."

It's been years since I've had a birthday party—since I left my parents' home to be exact—and I decided to throw one now.

Quirking his lips, he studies me for a moment, our eyes finally connecting.

I have no idea what he reads in my gaze—if anything, but I can't figure out a thing from his face.

"I don't know. Probably not. I won't be back until Sunday," he finally says, gauging my reaction.

Guarded, I push my emotions back, trying to act cool.

“Okay?” he asks, not giving me much choice.

“Okay...” I say, my voice trailing off.

With those words, I feel a door closing between us.

I push off the couch and walk into my office while he saunters out of the house and goes back to the backyard.

# S ENNA

“OH, MY GOD? WHERE IS HE?”

Harper’s voice ripples through the air, her sparkling eyes roving around, her voice brimming with excitement.

I motion to her to follow me into the bedroom and swing the door shut as soon as she enters the room.

The loud music crawls up the stairs, meshed with the guests’ voices, dripping through the walls.

People are dancing, chatting, and drinking. Most of them occupy the first floor of the house, while some of them have retreated into the backyard.

It’s the Who’s Who of the online entrepreneurial world, people handpicked by Harper and me from a list that’s been dutifully provided by a well-known PR firm in exchange for a fee.

This is a PR event more than anything else.

Most of my guests have no idea who invited them or what my business is all about.

“Tell me,” Harper demands impatiently as I enter the walk-in closet and fumble through the racks, still looking for something to wear.

Her rushed breaths tickle the back of my neck.

One hanger in each hand, I spin around to face her.

“He is not here.”

“Is he coming later?” she asks, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, driving me crazy.

“Probably not.”

“Oh...”

Disappointment comes in waves from her lips. And eyes.

I try to ignore her while running my gaze over the two options I’m holding in my hands. A maxi chiffon dress with a low plunging neckline in the back and scarves flowing from the shoulders that make me look like a sixties Goddess, and also a sequin jumper reminiscent of the disco era.

I glance in the mirror, pondering. She watches me in silence.

I swing my gaze back to her, and she still has that questioning look on her face.

Oh... I forgot. We were talking about him.

She looks at me with sad puppy eyes, her face flushed. Big ringlets of auburn hair roll down her back, her green eyes gleaming. A skintight mini dress paired with high heels shows her enticing curves and toned legs.

So not like her.

“How come you’re all sexed up? What happened to your boyfriend?” I ask, pulling another dress out of my closet.

Lenny Jamison—the man she called boyfriend for the past year or so—is notorious for painting Harper’s existence gray.

“We broke up,” she says, a grin lighting up her face.

I give her a double take.

“Aren’t people supposed to be sad when they’re breaking up?” I ask, smiling.

Lenny was a toxic man if I’ve ever seen one.

She flicks her hands up in the air before gripping her hips and slowly shaking her head.

“You were right about him,” she says as I inspect my next option with a critical eye.

Yellow is so not my color.

What was I thinking when I bought this dress? I lay the dress on the pile sitting on my bed.

Clearly, I’m not making any progress.

“About what?” I toss to Harper.

“He was a jerk.”

“Ahh... Mr. Lenny. I told you so.”

I give her a side glance.

She shrugs.

“For someone doing such a great job picking editorial pieces for my website, you’re missing the mark when it comes to men,” I say.

She gives me a girlish smile.

“It was not meant to be,” she says, amused.

She can say that twice. Why would it take her so long to realize? If I know anything about her is that she is a free spirit, brimming with life, unable to fit in a box, let alone a small one, and he just killed her with his insecurities.

Shifting my eyes away from her, I pick another hanger.

“Okay...” I murmur, my eyes roaming over the studded dress. “So why are you so obsessed with Jaden?” I ask, tossing her another glance.

She does that weight shifting from one foot to the other, and suddenly, I sense a headache growing.

“He is so fucking hot,” she says, elated.

Her eyes gleam as if charged with electricity.

I study her, baffled. I don’t recall setting them up, having a conference call or video chats. Where did she see him?



Have they exchanged pictures by any chance?

“Hmm... How do you know he’s hot? ”I ask, morbidly suspicious.

A naughty smile brushes her eyes. That can’t be good.

I freeze, waiting for her answer, a dress in one hand, a hanger in the other.

She leans to me and whispers conspiratorially.

“I found his page.”

“What page?”

She bites her lip and rubs her nose, a naughty smile scrunching it up.

“He has this little site...”

“What site?” I wheeze.

My heart and lungs collide.

I drop the dress on the bed and clasp my fingers on my hip.

“A membership site,” she murmurs.

I look at her, utterly incredulous.

She nods a couple of times.

“Yes. It’s like a personal site. Password protected. It has pictures of him, little snippets of video...”

My eyes widen in surprise.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

I know exactly what she’s talking about.

“I want to see it,” I bark.

She quickly pulls out her smartphone, drags her finger over the screen, and starts typing.

“Here. I texted you the link.”

My phone beeps on the bed.

I barely suppress my impulse to pounce on it.

I hurl a glare at the gadget—good thing, she cannot see me—and bite my lip, trying to coax myself into behaving like an adult.

“I’ll check it when I have time,” I say to mislead her.

Her voice echoes behind my back.

“He’s smoking hot. And not only that...”

I spin around.

Some of my thoughts must’ve spilled on my face.

She looks a bit shaken by my glare but has no intention of pulling away from the topic.

I flick my eyebrows up, encouraging her to continue.

“Yes?”

“It’s not only his body. I mean, he’s fine. What am I saying? I’ve never seen a man like him in my life. I mean, not in reality,” she says, raving about him.

I roll my eyes.

She completely ignores me.

“But man... the way he moves... Oh, my God!”

She clicks her tongue. Twice. It feels like a taser on my skin.

“He’s fucking delicious. A week ago, he posted a snippet of him rolling his hips. I lost my sleep over that clip.”

I tip my head to the side, looking at her incredulously. She must be playing cute now.

She dismisses me with a flick of her hand.

“No, no. Seriously. You’ll see...” She nods in agreement with herself. “And the sounds that he makes when he comes... Mmm...”

I hear my body crumbling. My throat feels funny, and my body shakes like a pudding.

Enough.

From the bed, I pick up the first dress I get my hands on, making sure I snag my phone along with it and hide it inside the pleats of the fabric.

“Okay, then... I need to go now. I’ll be downstairs as soon as I’m done,” I say dismissively.

She heads to the exit.

I almost enter the bathroom when I stop and toss words over my shoulder as if they’re nothing but a fleeting thought.

“So... Why are you so curious about him?”

She smiles, pushing back a giggle.

“He doesn’t reveal his face, and it teases the hell out of me. That... and maybe I have a chance at him,” she says.

Eating my retort, I spin around and dash into the bathroom.



SENNA

WELCOME to the new age of employment.

When your editor shows his tool and bedroom moves to your assistant, getting her all stirred up and setting her on a prowl.

Of all people, I shouldn’t be the one to pass judgment. It’s not as if I found him at a job fair.

Besides, I’m no better than her. I may be mad, in fact, precisely because he hasn’t shown me his moves online or offline for a while.

But a subscription-paid website?

I have to give it to him. The man is full of ideas and skill. I didn’t expect him to get the entrepreneurial bug so quickly. For fuck’s sake, he just started to work for me.

Fuming, I bump into things in the bathroom, fighting my curiosity and the need to feed it with more bits of information.

I'm worse than Harper in that regard. Her obsession is based on novelty, but I'm the one who's desperately hooked on him because I've already tasted the fucking tease.

Ugh!

I have to calm down. Perhaps take a cold shower.

Somehow, I manage to do just that, and for a few minutes, my mind goes blank.

Absently, I turn the water off, run a towel over my body, brush my hair, and put on my makeup. It doesn't take long before my mind shifts back to ruminating.

So now, he's out there, messing with other people's minds, making them drool over him. I clench my teeth and squeeze my fists.

Damnit. The man drives me fucking crazy.

Slowly, I breathe in and out, and let myself cool for a moment before I scoop up the phone, slide my finger over the screen, find Harper's message, and tap the link.

It's a plain page with not much information, which makes me think this is more like an insider's thing, his website thriving on word-of-mouth promotion.

Swiftly, I create an account and log in. One page in, I gasp and take a deep breath. Oh, shit... I feel like my heart is crawling up my neck.

Am I losing it already?

I can do this.

You can do it, Senna.

I wish I could laugh and not take it so seriously, but this feels more like pain than anything else.

Gripping the edge of the sink, I brace myself.

A picture of his bare torso greets me. It's definitely him. I recognize the line of his shoulders, the ink, the scars, the

teasing hips, and the washboard abdomen.

He looks like he just walked out of the gym, his muscles pumped up, his skin glistening with sweat.

Sweatpants ride low on his hips, the outline of his hard cock pushing against the soft fabric.

I swallow a couple of times, my throat dry like chalk.

I run my eyes over the pictures. It's him. Everywhere... In full splendor. Teasing. Enticing. Getting me hot and wet between my legs. Not only me... Of course. There must be others.

Gaping, I take him in. I drink him in. Pouring the images of him into my brain. Letting him poison me, making me addicted to him.

He's, um... naked. In the bed, in the shower, or in the armchair. A sheet thrown here, a pillow over there, or a towel wrapped around his waist. The angle carefully chosen, revealing enough but never too much.

Picture after picture teases the hell out of me, making me drool and swallow hard. This whole thing is meant to drive his viewers crazy.

As if it's not enough, tantalizing gifs turn up the heat.

Hands gliding down his body, sliding off his jeans, sweatpants, or a sheet.

Sometimes they unwrap a towel, offering a glimpse of his erection, but never the entire thing.

And then comes the notorious roll of his hips. Oh, my... Now, I know what she was talking about.

A side angle... The shirt is completely open, his jeans barely clinging to his hips, and his fly is half undone. Shoulders propped against a wall, he teasingly rocks his hips, drawing slow, sensual moves that make my thighs clench as if he enters me.

The snippet runs on a loop. I watch it over and over again, tense and breathless. My neck feels sore from the awkward

position.

And that's not all.

There's a full section for premium members, and with nothing better to do, I purchase the entire, fucking package.

Ironic, isn't it?

Automated to perfection, the damn thing throws money at his bank account. Talking about a great business model.

I click on the first video clip.

My mouth drops open.

Sprawled on his back, one arm folded under his head, he slides his hand down his abs and reaches his erection. He wraps his fingers around the engorged flesh and rolls his hand up and down his hard length. The memory of our trip to the Keys comes back to me, spurring a rush of tingles between my legs.

His eyes remain close, his abs waving slightly.

His back arches, his hard butt pressing against the mattress as he spreads his legs a little more, giving the camera a full view.

Tight balls, trimmed groin, and the smooth outline of his cock fill my view, the image sending shockwaves through my brain. Veins wrap around his girth like plump vines. I feel a sweet pain in my sex.

His fist keeps going up and down.

Most of his face is out of the frame, but not entirely. His lips part and curl into a teasing smile as he slowly strokes his dick.

I'm so tense I could burst a blood vessel. I lick my lips, hopelessly trying to replenish the moisture. His body and hands whip up a storm of lust in me.

It strikes me as pure art. The way his hand slides up and down. And the way he moves his body. Everything is done deliberately slowly to pull his audience into a trance, and make

them feel exactly what he feels, yearning for that deep lust coursing through his blood.

I shift my phone from one hand to the other, its frame sliding through my sweaty fingers. Without tearing my gaze away, I run my hand over a towel to dry my skin.

He tilts his hips up, the pleasure surging through his body. I'm tense and hot. His chest heaves, and so does mine.

Slowly, he slips into a different world and doesn't mind the camera or the intrusive eyes of the strangers indulging.

It's only him, his pleasure, and his playful mind.

Soft sounds fall from his parted lips—and a string of heavy breaths— sending more pleasure through my body.

I prop myself against the sink, my legs no longer steady.

His hips push higher, thrusting and sliding his erection through his fist while I squeeze my thighs, wet between my legs.

His hand moves rhythmically, polishing the crown and then rubbing his shaft.

Mesmerized, I watch his cum spill over his abs, his sensual groans giving me gooseflesh, my puckered nipples poking at the air.

I'm seconds away from fingering myself.

Annoyed, I turn off my phone.

I'm hot and sweaty, and all that tension morphs into choking anger. I toss the towel to the side and dash out of the bathroom, heading straight to the closet.

From inside a garment bag, I pull out a different set of clothes and slip them on.

Moments later, I examine my reflection.

Perfect.

I glance at the time.

I'm late to my birthday party, yet I can't fight the temptation and slide my finger over the screen one more time

and log in to his website.

I scroll down to the video clips section and sift through the gallery.

Rushed, I tap on a few of them and get a quick glimpse of the recordings. I make a mental note to review them later when one of them snags my attention.

I tap it, and a full screen comes to life. My heart sinks.

Two silhouettes come alive against the dark background.

The man leans against a wall while the woman sits on her knees at his feet.

A mane of long, blonde hair cascades down her back.

He's shirtless, his fly open, his jeans sitting low on his hips.

Naked, she has her fingers wrapped around his hard meat, the sliding motion of her hand in perfect synch with the bobbing of her head against his groin.

I can only see her face, but it's enough.

Her eyes are closed as she keeps rolling her lips, flicking her tongue, and sucking on his flesh.

I recognize his stance and tattoos. He slips his hand under her hair and brushes it all back, revealing more of her face.

She looks up at him as he tilts his chin down, most of his face out of the frame.

She picks up the pace, and his chest starts rising and falling rapidly as he rhythmically thrusts his cock between her lips.

The microphone picks up the sounds— his heavy breathing and her soft moans. I hold my breath to hear them better.

Time warps as I become a witness to their pleasure.

A few more moments slip by. Minutes, perhaps?

The assertive knock on the bathroom door registers with me like a church bell in my head.



Startled, I gasp, my hand flying to my mouth as my phone goes airborne, landing on the bathroom tile.

I freeze.

From where I stand, I can still see that blonde giving him head, and I can still hear her moans. I throw a towel over the phone, trying to bury the sound.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

Harper’s voice seeps through the door, lined with concern.

“Yeah... I am,” I say, snatching the phone off the floor and turning it off.

I straighten my back and crack the door open.

Her mouth pulls open as she takes in my fluffed-up hair and crazy outfit.

“I’m ready.”

“Holy shit! Who do you want to fuck?”

“That’s none of your business,” I say, not having a damn clue.

# JADEN

JUDGING by the line of cars— pulling in and out, the crew directing the mayhem, and the music blasting behind the wall of trees—I gather the party is in full swing.

I slip by two women who make out against a wall not far from the entrance, barely keeping their bodies straight.

One loses her balance and falls into my arms, while the other sizes up with her drunken eyes. I push the wobbly woman to her feet and walk inside.

Loud music throbs inside the house, bouncing against the walls and making the heated bodies grind against each other.

The lights shift in sync with the music beat.

I glance around, scanning the faces. Nothing catches my eye.

I'm hardly a party man. I missed most of them when I was a teen, and they almost never happened later on.

I swivel my head one more time. Searching the crowd, I look for her. A bad feeling hovers over me.

Coming back a day earlier to surprise her no longer seems like a good idea.

A soft hand touches my arm.

I turn around. A pretty face with smiling eyes fills my sight.

“Oh, my God. You are him.”

Her voice sounds familiar.

Harper?

I give her a swift once-over. For some reason, that’s not how I imagined her—a young woman with a mane of unruly hair who now walks into a patch of light, her features coming into better focus.

She wears a form-fitting dress that sets off her figure and heels that make her legs look longer. Her eyes dip to my tattoos, her fingers kneading my arm gently.

Recognition flickers through her eyes.

“It is you,” she says, barely breathing.

“Harper?”

“Mm-hmm,” she murmurs, her gaze drifting slowly, taking in my body.

She swings her eyes back to my face, curls her arms around my neck, leans on me, and whispers in my ear.

“I’m a premium member... You know?”

She pulls back a little, a flirty smile tugging at her lips.

Come to think of it, telling her about the site was a dumb idea. I thought she’d hook me up with some traffic and forget about me.

She did— that’s how my little side project took off, became viral, and brought in the paying members—but she got a bit attached.

Okay. Perhaps more than a bit.

That was bad planning on my part. The whole idea was not to reveal my identity or meet with members in real life.

“So you like it?” I ask coyly.

“Are you kidding me? I love it. It makes me horny as hell.”

Her eyes slip down to my groin—as if I needed another hint.

“What happened to your boyfriend?” I ask.

She starts chewing on her lip.

“We just broke up.”

“Not because of sex, I gather,” I say like I’m some shrink.

“Well... It was rather because of the lack of it.”

Her lips purse comically. I stay silent.

“Do you want something to drink?” she asks.

“Sure,” I say, eager to shift her focus away from me and break the awkward moment.

She sashays to the bar while I retreat into a corner.

Craning my neck, I survey the room when a woman’s back catches my eye, and I do a double take.

No. It can’t be.

Is that who I think it is?

I drag my gaze down over her, slowly taking inventory.

Waving, black hair down her back, long legs, and her butt shaking, following the rhythm of the music.

My eyes trail her sculpted shoulders before dipping briefly to her waist.

Thigh-high stockings up her legs, lacy garters peeking from below the hemline of her mini skirt. Laced up at the back, her skirt barely covers her butt. A lacy top with molded cups hugs her chest, most of her tits spilling out.

I feel a twitch inside my jeans and part my legs to ease the building pressure.

A man stands in front of her, his eyes locked with hers. A different kind of tension barrels through my body.

She snakes her arms around his neck, grinding into him.

It doesn't take long before his hands slide up her thighs, and his fingers trace her stockings and garters while she smoothly rolls her hips for him.

The way they touch each other speaks of intimacy.

He had her once or twice. Perhaps a dozen times. The chemistry is obvious.

I shift my focus back to him again.

Well-built— about my height—he has dark hair and sports a sexy stubble.

His hands slip under her skirt, in plain view kneading her ass.

“Here.”

Harper's voice spears through my brain.

She hands me my drink, and I toss it back without even glancing at it. She takes a sip of wine before placing her drink on the table and pivoting back to me.

Grinning sultrily, she leans against my chest.

“So... Do you want to dance?”

She slowly sways her hips from side to side, grinding into me. I look at her, cold as ice.

“No. Not really...” I mutter.

“We can skip dancing then,” she says.

Her arms loop around my neck when I sense a pointed stare. Hands on her hips, Senna grills me with her eyes.

I tear Harper off, spin around, and walk away.

“Hey. Where are you going?”

Senna's heels hit the floor behind me.

I dash to the exit, and just as I'm about to step outside, her hand curls around my forearm.

“Jaden?”

I yank my arm out of her grip.

“Where are you going? You can’t leave.”

Her voice brims with anger.

“Jaden!”

I turn around and grip her elbow, her eyes widening with surprise.

“I told you I do whatever the hell I want,” I growl in a gravelly voice.

Tears glisten in her eyes—only for a second—and then a bitter smile rolls to her lips.

“Yeah. I know,” she throws at me, hurt. “I just saw it.”

“You saw what?”

“Your ‘page’,” she says mockingly, quoting the air with her fingers.

Drunk people bump into her as they swing in and out of the house. I haul her into a quiet room in the back and lock the door behind us.

Her eyes follow my moves, barely registering a thing.

She leans against the door, looking at me through a veil of tears.

“Why does it matter to you what I do? It’s nothing that you haven’t seen before.”

She tilts her shoulders in a soft shrug, then tips her head down, slowly brushing away a few tears from her lashes.

“Why does it matter to you, Senna?”

The softness of my voice takes her by surprise.

She flicks her eyes up, trails of tears staining her cheeks. With trembling fingers, she wipes them away.

“Tell me. How can it possibly matter?”

She searches my eyes.

“Because it hurts,” she mutters.

Smiling, I bring my hand to her face, brush a strand of hair away, and tenderly run my thumb across her cheek.

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

“There was a woman...” she says and pauses, studying my eyes again. “Blonde. Who is she?”

“No one.”

“How can she be no one? She’s on your website.”

Anger streams through her voice.

I say nothing.

“Was that a recent recording?” she asks.

I push back a smile.

“Had you taken your eyes off my dick for a second and checked my ink, you would’ve figured out it wasn’t a recent recording.”

She cocks an eyebrow at me, annoyed.

I lift my arm and point to a patch of skin.

“Have you seen this tattoo in that recording?”

She checks the ink, fussing.

“Um... I don’t think so,” she says, still unsure.

“Do you want to double-check?”

“No, I believe you...” she says, her tone hinting otherwise.

Curling my lips into a faint smile, I study her in silence.

“When was that recorded?” she asks.

“A few years back before I started to...”

Her hands flick up.

“Okay. I don’t want to hear it.”

Flustered, she swings her gaze away.

Slowly, I slide my hand over her neck. Her blood throbs beneath my fingers.

“Are you jealous of my past now?”

She slowly shakes her head.

“No,” she murmurs.

“Don’t lie to me, Senna.”

She pouts and looks away again.

I let my gaze drift down, slowly shaking my head as I take her in.

“What happened tonight?” I ask in a quiet voice.

I lift my gaze and lock her eyes.

Her eyebrows tilt in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

Tipping my chin, I motion to her outfit.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

“You used to like it.”

“I do like it... If you dress up for me, not for your fuck buddy out there.”

She presses her lips into a line while I curve mine into a lopsided smile.

“What was your plan, Senna?” I ask, slightly pulling away from her.

“What do you mean?”

Raking my teeth over my lip, I give her another once over.

“You know exactly what I mean. You had no fucking idea I’d be back,” I say, no longer smiling. “Why would you dress like that for him?”

“Guess,” she throws at me, frustrated.

I bring my hand to my face and slowly rub my chin.

“He’s the fucking escort, isn’t he?” I toss back at her.

Darkness slides over her eyes.

“It takes one to recognize one...” she retorts, her words punching me hard.



Satisfaction flickers in her eyes when she registers my pain.

“Why do you care who he is? Wasn’t that the whole point of our agreement?” she sneers. “We’re both doing what we want. What makes you think you can do it and I can’t?”

“Is this what you want?”

She takes a step toward me, slicing me with her eyes.

“Since when does it matter what I want? You fuck for money, and he fucks for money, and just because women are not your flavor doesn’t make you any different than him.”

My other hand shoots out of my pocket and curls around her neck. Startled, she loses her balance and crashes into me. Her hands clutch my arm.

Fear brushes over her eyes.

“Let’s not fool ourselves, Senna. You are no better than him or me. Just because you are the one who pays men to fuck you doesn’t mean you are a saint... You’re as much of a slut as we are,” I hiss.

Her hand shoots toward my face, and I tilt my head back. She misses it by a hair.

In one motion, I cuff her wrists and crash with her against the door. She growls and fights me, writhing against me madly, and I pin her with my hips.

Squirming, she tries to bite me.

“Let me go,” she barks.

I crash my weight onto her. Her body starts to soften.

For a few more moments, she keeps pushing against me. Unfazed, I lock her wrists and slide my fingers into her hair, pressing my body into hers.

Within seconds, she feels me hard and quickly loses steam.

“I fucking hate you...” she blurts, exasperated.

I laugh.

It pisses her off even more.

“Why would you hate me, darling?” I murmur in her hair, softly grazing her earlobe with my lips.

Her nipples tighten against my chest, a shudder falling through her body.

She stops fighting me, and I release her wrists.

“Tell me, babe,” I murmur, running both hands up her neck.

Panting, she wraps her arms around me.

“Why would you hate me? Huh?” I say again, her mouth looking for mine.

She runs her fingers up my back and starts kneading my muscles.

I sense her silent desperation.

“Tell me, baby...” I murmur, and then our lips collide.

Her moans send shudders through my groin.

She wraps her mouth around my tongue, famished and consumed with passion as we roll our lips and breathe as one, our flesh connecting in an instant.

Hard as fuck, I break the kiss and tear away from her.

Baffled, she lets her arms slide off, her eyes begging for an explanation.

Gently, I touch her face. My thumb tracing her swollen lips.

“You are so lost, Senna,” I say.

She looks at me, intrigued.

I nod softly.

“Yes, you are. But just because you’re lost doesn’t mean there is no way. You just have to find it.”

# S ENNA

HIS WORDS SEND fire through my senses, feeding my anger.

“I need to go,” I say curtly.

He looks at me, unfazed.

“Okay,” he murmurs.

Smiling, he tears his fingers away from me.

Without another word, I swing the door open and dash to the garage.

His voice thunders.

“Senna?”

I don’t stop.

His footsteps echo right behind me.

“Where are you going?” he throws at me.

Rushed, I snatch the keys from the panel and dart to my car.

Without a word, I slip in, shut the door, turn on the ignition, and back up. He takes a few steps to the side, away from the car, trying to catch my gaze as he shouts my name again.

His voice gets swallowed by the noise of the engine. I turn left and drive out, heading to the exit.

The gates slide open. His car rolls right behind me.

Deftly, I maneuver between the incoming cars and slip away, leaving him stuck.

I pick up speed.

The night falls—dark and quiet—all around me.

I take a few more turns, opting for a route that snakes through trees and tucked-in houses. Soon, the homes remain behind, and darkness grows along the path.

Lights flicker in the distance.

I roll the window down. Crisp air fills my lungs, bringing me a certain clarity. But with it comes a lot of sadness. Frustration grows in me with every mile I leave behind.

It doesn't take long before tears clog my throat and well up in my eyes. I run a shaky hand across my cheek, cursing quietly.

The car eats more miles as I grapple with my thoughts.

When has he become indispensable to me?

Stripping me of power. Making me beg for him. Bringing back the girl I used to be. The girl I so much hate.

He doesn't need me. Or her.

Bitter, I chuckle softly, and then I curse again.

The headlights of a car signal in my rearview mirror, approaching quickly.

That must be him.

He flicks his headlights again, closing the gap rapidly. I step on the gas and add some distance between us. It only lasts a few moments. His ride roars behind mine, the beams of light blinding me.

I ease the pressure on the gas.

“Stop the fucking car, Senna!” he thunders through the open window as he pulls next to me, and we drive side by side.

I yank the car onto a secondary road, raising a dust storm behind me. The screech of spinning tires rips through the air as he turns the car around and dashes after me.

“Fucking jerk.”

He chases me for a few good moments before the road begins to narrow, and soon we hit a dead end. A wall of trees rises ahead.

I step on the brakes and jolt the car to a stop. He pulls his ride next to mine. I reach under the back seat and scoop out my gun.

He’s already out, rounding the front of his car, when I jerk the door open and point the gun at him.

“Stay away from me, Jaden!”

My voice splits the air, making him freeze that very instant.

His hands shoot up. He stays quiet for a moment as I slip out of the car, my gun aimed at him.

“Chill, baby...” he says, calm.

“Don’t you fucking ‘baby’ me!” I bark. “I don’t need to calm down as much as I don’t need you. Or you to fuck me.”

He lowers his hands, his eyes still trained on me.

“We can talk,” he says in a softer voice.

“I don’t need to fucking talk, Jaden. And I don’t need your fucking teasing, either. You’re right. I’m no better than you or Abel. I’m a fucking slut. That’s what I am. I’m a slut who pays other sluts to fuck her. I’m not supposed to be like that. I didn’t ask for it, but now that I’m here, there’s nothing I can do about it. Because I don’t have the slightest idea how to be something other than what I am.”

He takes a step in my direction. I cock my gun.

“Stay where you are,” I bark again.

He freezes.

“I pursued you, and I regret it. I thought I’d learn something from you and perhaps even heal myself if you’d let me close to you, but I was wrong. Nothing seems to get to you. Nothing. You don’t need me. And that’s fine...” I say, flicking my free hand in the air. “I don’t give a flying crap. You’re free to do whatever you want, but you better leave right now.”

He shoves his hands into his pockets and purses his lips, watching me in silence.

I lower my gun.

“And by the way, I don’t care whether you work for me or not. It turns out it’s bad either way,” I say, my airways closing as a panic attack spirals inside me.

This can’t be happening.

But it does.

I start to wheeze, the same chemical reaction that has turned my life into a living hell, setting in motion waves of angst and panic, making my pulse spike, and the air not nearly enough.

Panting, I take a step back, bracing for the impending panic attack.

“Please go...” I mutter as my heart starts slamming against my ribcage.

He takes a step in my direction. I flick my hand, leveling my gun at him again.

“Stay where you are,” I shout.

Brazen, he locks my eyes, a dark smile tugging at his lips.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Jaden.”

Unfazed, he takes another step. That’s when I fire my gun. I aim away from him, the bullet grazing the ground, the sharp sound spearing through the air.

He lunges at me, snakes an arm around me, yanks the gun out of my hand, and tosses it to the ground. His arms lock around me as a full-fledged panic attack begins barreling through me with a vengeance.

Breathing chaotically, I grab his arms, desperately holding onto him. He pulls me into his chest as I grapple with the heat and then the shivers, my heart pounding like a drum machine.

I slump in his arms.

His fingers wrap around my neck.

“Calm down, baby,” he says softly.

I wish I could, but my mind is no longer mine. It spins more doom and gloom, my growing panic fueled by the chemicals racing in my blood.

The fear rams through me, over and over again, and the more I fight it, the faster I sink.

It’s a nightmare I cannot stop.

“Senna,” he calls again, and I collapse in his embrace.

His lips brush my hair, his arms draping around me.

I clutch him harder.

“Nothing happens, baby. Trust me...” he says as my eyes fill with tears.

He brings his fingers to my face while I clutch his neck with both hands. My breaths roll faster. And faster. The reality starts fading at the edges, and the ground begins to spin.

I sink my nails into his skin.

“Jaden...” I gasp.

And then I feel his lips.

Warm and silky, scented with the smoky evening. Making love to mine, kissing my panic away, slowing down my blood, and pulling me out of the nightmare.

He lets me breathe through him, slowly bringing me back to calmness. The reality comes back to me with arms wrapped around me and lips pressed against mine.

He kisses me softly and lovingly, giving me the affection I've never had.

Tenderly, I kiss him back.

“Jaden...” I murmur against his lips as I taste my first love kiss.

He lets me slip into his world, and there is nothing between us. No time or space or words. No thoughts or fears, or doubts. Only a river of emotions flowing through both of us as we attempt to quench our thirst.

“Please...” I murmur, trembling with need.

Smoothly, he leans against the car and lifts me up, pulling me on him. My knees slide to either side of him. And everything speeds up. My heart, my breaths, the tension growing in his grip.

Trailing my thighs with his fingers, he rides my skirt up while I curl my hands around his shoulders.

Eyes closed, I relish his touch.

My skin vibrates beneath his fingers as he runs his palms over my hips and cups my butt.

Long fingers tug my panties to the side and stroke me between my legs. The reverberation of his touch travels up my spine. I roll my hips to meet his fingers. I also grind against his fly. He's hard beneath my crotch.

I do it again. And again. He tugs my panties lower.

Cold air sweeps over my flesh, enhancing the sensation coming from his touch. Hands clasped on his shoulders, I lift my hips so he can roll my panties down. His fingers hook inside my neckline and rip my top open. Smoothly, he scoops my breasts out and crashes his lips onto my chest. Squeezing my mounds, he captures a nipple between his lips.

He circles it and licks it, playing with it until I almost come. More heat simmers inside me, the urgency and longing only rising. He nudges me to my knees again and peels the top and bra off completely.



The few buttons fastening my skirt fall victim to his hands, and they end up on the ground when he harshly rips the fabric. A slant of wind brushes my stomach rolling down over my cleft.

I straighten my back and spread my legs, his lips coming to my clit this time. A feast of pleasure ensues.

I'm wet and hot, and he is skilled. My hands slip into his hair, his mouth working my swollen flesh.

Pleasure starts to surge through me when he unfastens his belt and works his fly open, his hand going down his shaft.

One hand grabs me by the waist while the other brings him right against my entrance. I slide down, dripping wet around his length.

His arms close around me as I fit around him like a glove.

"I love it..." I say quietly.

"Me too."

He twitches inside me, enhancing my pulsing tension.

Slowly, my hips roll as I ride his hardness, gliding up and down and savoring the lustful moments.

"I missed this..." I murmur.

He locks my mouth as I rock my hips.

"Damn it, Jaden..." I murmur, splaying my fingers over his neck.

Quickly, I pick up the pace, moving harder and faster.

"Oh... my..."

My moans vibrate in the air.

"Fuck, Jaden..." I say as I lose the sense of everything but him.

I come, groaning and gasping, feeling him hard as steel. He lets me taste the pleasure before slipping from under me, bending me over the hood of my car, kicking my legs open, and sliding his stiff cock into me.

My brain lights up with pleasure.

“Fuck...” I murmur as he rams into me with full force.

And that’s where it all begins and ends.

The next minutes become a blur, a journey to a different world, a race to lock those lustful moments and never reach the end of them. He grabs me with both hands and hammers me, driving me up and breaking me while falling with me.

I close my eyes and fill myself with him. He’s wild and shows no mercy. He doesn’t spare my flesh, and sure enough, he doesn’t spare my heart.

And yet, somehow, he makes it worth it.

# JADEN

I TURN OFF THE WATER, run a towel over my body, and wrap another one around my waist. Glancing briefly in the mirror, I run my fingers through my hair and comb it all back.

I tear my gaze away and walk out of the bathroom, entering the bedroom.

The place is quiet, and lit candles line the sills.

A gust of wind rolls into the room, bringing in a floral scent.

Senna shifts her eyes to me. Sprawled on the bed, she taps the mattress next to her, giving me a good view of her naked body as she props herself on her elbow.

Slowly, I untuck the towel, drop it, and slide it next to her. She comes closer to my chest, and my fingers trail her spine while she runs her thumb across my lips.

“This feels good,” she says.

Her soft breath tickles my skin.

“Mm-hmm...” I murmur, running my fingers through her hair.

“Has it been like that for you before?” she asks.

I smile, quiet.

Intrigued, she looks at me.

“Has it?” she asks again, a soft grin curving her lips.

I slowly shake my head.

“No. Not really.”

“Why?”

“Bad timing, wrong people.”

A bitter smile tugs at her lips, her eyes going vacant.

“Bad people, huh?” she mutters absently.

“Some of them... Yes.”

She shifts her focus back to me.

“Is that what it was for you too?” I ask.

“Maybe...” she says.

“You didn’t tell anyone?”

Her eyes lose their luster.

She looks pale in the dimness as she struggles with her emotions. Light dances in her tears when she pulls her gaze away.

“I told my mom... Then. But she didn’t believe me. Or rather, didn’t want to believe me. Not my version of the story, anyway. She said I had made the whole thing up.”

“What thing?”

She stays quiet before she speaks again, her eyes no longer locked with mine.

“He was not a good man...” she finally says, her words sounding like a confession.

A rueful smile comes to her lips as she relives the memory of that man.

“But he was very close to them. And they liked him a lot. Why wouldn’t they? He was the perfect man. Good looking,

wealthy. Driven. The quintessential definition of success. He was the kind of man they would've liked for me as well."

She shifts her eyes to me, expecting a reaction. I stay silent, observing her.

She takes a long breath before talking again.

"I couldn't stop him," she says, the skin around her eyes creasing from another bitter smile. "He liked it hard. He craved having that power over women. And especially over me. He might have had the appearance and sophistication of an educated man, but deep inside, he was nothing but dark lust. That's why I had to leave and get away from him. But once I left, I couldn't go back. Failure was not an option for me. It wasn't only him I left behind. It was my family and my old life."

She pauses and muses over something, her eyes briefly coming to mine.

"I didn't have a plan. And even if I had, I was so unprepared for life it would've made no difference. I grew up in a very restrictive environment and didn't have much love around me, but I was brought up to live a life of privilege and never face the harsh reality. Nobody taught me how to make a living. I had no idea how to support myself or interact with normal people. So I did the best that I could the first few months, bouncing from one place to another, forced to face my worst fears, and deal with stress and anxiety. Despite all that, I didn't want to go back. One thing I did well. I learned how to make money fast and always keep things to myself. I couldn't trust anyone. And I didn't listen to anyone either. I learned that no matter what people say and try to teach you, it doesn't mean shit when it comes to your life. Your life is yours. You're the only one who knows what's best for you. No one can teach you that. What I learned from others didn't have much value to me. What I learned from my experience was invaluable to me. That's how it got ingrained in my brain that money is the blood of everything. And then I realized... That's why my parents didn't try to stop me. That's what they counted on. They betted on the fact that once I hit real life, I'd sober up

and change my mind. They thought I would return to them and beg for mercy, forever indebted to them. ”

She slowly shakes her head.

“They had no idea...” she mutters. “There was no way I could go back. It wasn’t pride or anything on my part. It was mostly desperation. Plus, once I got a taste of freedom, there was no point in going back. Living on my own— as bad as it was—had given me absolute power over who I was. I no longer had to define myself according to their values. I didn’t have to repress myself and pretend to be someone else. So anyway...” she says in a mellow voice. “The first few months were the worst. I took every single job I could and learned as fast as I could, and I still sucked at them. And there were other things I had to do on the side to make enough money to survive.”

“I have a hard time imagining that,” I say.

She breathes out a chuckle.

“I could say the same thing about you.”

“Yeah... I guess.”

“That’s life,” she says, suddenly in a pensive mood. “You never know what’s around the corner. And when you’re new to this, you have no idea how to handle things. A lot of stuff I figured out in hindsight. I missed out on opportunities and did a lot of foolish things. That’s how I learned. Little by little, I started to get good at it. I never talked to my family again or heard from that man. So things worked out well. After having that experience with him, my body didn’t respond to anything else. Romance didn’t do anything for me. I tried it, and it led to nothing. It dawned on me I wasn’t cut for it because a part of me was crushed and numb. I made peace with it and moved on. And then I met you...” she says, her voice trailing off.

She moves her gaze to me.

“How can I be of any good to you, Senna?”

She shrugs.

“I wish I knew. You just are better than anything I’ve ever had.”

“You don’t even know my whole story,” I say, rolling onto my side and stretching my arm out to grab a cigarette from the pack on the nightstand.

Unhurriedly, I place it between my lips and light it.

She studies me as I take a long drag and slowly blow the smoke out. I set the lighter on the nightstand and pull an ashtray next to me.

“That’s because you never told me,” she says.

I let out another stream of smoke before I speak.

“The first man who sucked my dick wasn’t a John. It was our legal guardian,” I say.

Her eyes flick wide with surprise.

I slowly nod, detached and empty of emotions.

“Yeah... He was a remote cousin of my mom. He made his guardianship contingent upon my acceptance of the situation and, of course, my silence. I granted him both. I didn’t want to lose Sara or to be forced to live in a group home. I was seventeen. I did what I thought was best for Sara and me.”

I pause and stretch a bitter smile.

“At least he didn’t want to fuck me,” I say, attempting a bit of dark humor while tapping my cigarette above the ashtray. “He had a wife and small kids. A military guy. They moved to Europe as soon as I was eighteen.”

I move my gaze away and stare blankly at the ceiling, slowly shaking my head while recollecting those times.

“I didn’t feel a thing. And for the most part, I tried not to think about it,” I say, bringing my gaze back to her.

Her eyes are trained on me. Soft and glazed with tears.

“I just let it roll over me as if it was nothing,” I mutter. “I still liked girls and fucked them but never fell for them. I couldn’t feel a thing for the people I had sex with. I knew that

part of me was broken. I let it be and never dwelled. It was what it was. At the time, life had other ways to keep my mind away from things, and I didn't date or have a girlfriend."

A few moments of silence pass.

"What about the woman in that clip?"

A soft smile tickles my lips.

"She was hot and very much into me. The problem was she was into a lot of other guys, so we parted ways. After that, I knew I couldn't find much of anything on the streets, so I gave up thinking about it."

Sunk in thought, she ponders.

"The men from Jill's... Why were they after you?"

"One of the deals had turned bad. They threatened me and said they'd get to Sara if I didn't meet them, so I did."

I exhale smoke, flicking my cigarette against the lip of the ashtray.

"A stupid story. Some chick I got hired for became obsessed with me. She told her husband that she had fallen for me and left him. He got pissed and sent his goons to collect me. You know the rest."

We lock eyes.

"Is that enough of a story for you?" I ask, smiling.

"I guess so," she says, not tasting my dark humor.

"So what about Abel?" I ask, changing the topic. "Is that even his name?"

She nods.

"Yes, it is," she says quietly.

"Why did you invite him to the party?"

"I didn't plan to do anything with him if that's what you ask."

I grin around my cigarette.

"I didn't say anything."



“He’s a good man.”

“I bet he is. He’s a good-looking guy, too,” I point out.  
“But that goes without saying.”

A small smile tugs at her lips, gleaming in her eyes.

“It’s not my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was, but you sure know how to pick them.”

“He came highly recommended.”

“Did he? Hmm... Is that how these things work? Care to share the going rate?”

I grin mischievously.

She slaps me softly on my chest.

“Don’t even think about it. I’m not giving you tips. You’ve become quite the entrepreneur lately.”

“I got the bug from you, darling,” I say, giving her a lopsided smile as I put the cigarette out.

I slide the ashtray onto the nightstand and pop in a mint.

“Was he any good?” I ask, rolling to my back.

She gives me a guilty smile.

“Yes, he was. Not as good as you, though.”

“You’re kissing my ass now.”

“No, I’m not.”

“So, how much did you pay him?”

“Two grand a session.”

“Fuck.”

“I paid you more that weekend.”

“And yet you pay me now about the same to slave for you for an entire week,” I say, a sly grin creeping across my lips.

She slides on top of me, her lips planting a trail of kisses on my chest.

“But see... You get bonuses,” she says before her tongue swirls over my nipple.

“Do I get one now?” I joke.

“Yes, you do,” she says, breathing a soft chuckle.

“I can’t fucking wait,” I say, locking my hands behind my neck and sinking my back into the pillow.

A curtain of hair slides over my body as her tongue flicks lower and lower, trailing steadily toward my groin. My cock stirs between her breasts.

“It looks like you get a bonus, too,” I murmur, watching her fingers curl around my dick and her mouth mold around the chiseled tip.

She rolls her lips down, and I tilt my hips up, hitting the back of her throat. She moans and wedges herself between my legs.

Her hair brushes my groin while her mouth slides down, her tongue gliding around my shaft.

“Mmm... I like that.”

Arching her back, she pushes her bottom up, her mouth still connected with my hard flesh.

Tipping my head to the side, I get a glimpse of her rear in the mirror stretching across the wall.

“Fuck,” I murmur, my eyes glued to the spot between her legs as my erection slides into her mouth.

She glances up at me.

“Your butt is perfect,” I say.

Craning my neck out, I study the angle.

“It would look perfect on—”

“Don’t even think about it,” she says, my cock slipping out of her mouth with a pop.

She grins.

I smirk.

“Not my fault, baby. It just looks good.”

I prop myself up on my elbows and motion to her.

Smiling, she slides her lips down again, working me with her hand at the same time.

As if she knows what bounces around in my head, she arches her spine and thrusts her butt out while spreading her legs, giving me the perfect view of her entrance.

Propped on one arm, I hold her hair up to see her face. She rolls her mouth over my shaft, fucking me with her eyes.

“You’re pretty good...” I say, stretching a cocky grin.

She’s about to give me her opinion.

“Not now, baby,” I say, relishing the pleasure coming from her lips.

She closes her eyes and takes me deeper as I roll my hips to fill her mouth. My gaze travels from her lips and hollow cheeks to the reflection of her backside in the mirror.

I tilt my head back to get a better view, her folds peeking through the gap between her legs.

“Damn it...” I murmur, my brain as fired up as my cock. “You look so good that it hurts my dick.”

She slaps my thigh.

“For real now,” I say, a smile lining my voice. “Too bad you don’t want to see it.”

She mumbles something around my cock.

I breathe a soft chuckle.

“Stay focused, baby girl,” I say, earning another slap. “Good girl. And bossy,” I say, lifting her hair higher to see the beautiful arch of her neck.

“You are so hot...” I murmur, and she glances at me, her eyes glistening with tears as I hit the back of her throat with my bulging crown.

“You’re fucking good,” I say, no longer smiling, our eyes locked in what feels like a trance of pure pleasure.

Her lips and hand keep stroking me, lust coursing through our veins. As the pleasure surges, I register the softness of her eyes and the warmth of her heart, both thawing something inside me.

Her eyelids slide down slowly, obscuring that softness in her heart. One tear falls from the corner of her eye, staining her cheek.

I wipe it away with my thumb.

Eyes closed, she raises a storm inside me.

My eyes swing to the mirror, taking in her most vulnerable spot. Hooked on that view, I slip into a trance with her and lick my lips, craving the taste of her arousal in my mouth.

My chest starts rocking, my muscles shifting hard beneath my skin.

I press her head against my groin, her tongue swirling around me. She sucks me harder and strokes me faster, urgency building in her touch.

Drunk on her, I imagine her pussy filled with me as well. Her head bobbing... Her hips jolting... Her body shuddering with pleasure.

Her mouth emptying me.

“Fuck me,” I growl, falling into my own trap.

I swiftly pull out, roll from under her, and leap off the bed.

With one hand, I grab her butt and slide into her wetness.

Her warm center hugs me like a glove of love.

With every thrust, she shakes her hips, trickling more wetness around my shaft.

She moans louder and louder as I grab her hips and fuck her hard. The tension explodes in my groin as we both come.

Moments of intense pleasure consume us before we slow down, and I tear away from her.

Panting, she sprawls on her back—legs spread, my cum dripping from her entrance.

She looks at me, thunderstruck.

“What the hell was that?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, twirling away and heading to the bathroom.

# S ENNA

THE SKY STRETCHES above us with no clouds all the way to the horizon. Draped in light, the ocean glimmers, looking like a mirror of the sky.

“Anna... Anna.”

Taking tiny, rushed steps, Emma closes the gap between us. I stretch my arms to catch her.

She dives into me before I pick her up.

A scarlet dress with tiny ladybugs hugs her little body.

“It’s Senna... not Anna,” Jaden suggests, sinking into a lounge chair next to me.

“Anna,” she says, unfazed, curling her lips into a playful smile.

Jaden’s gaze shifts to me while I watch her, mesmerized.

“Anna it is,” he says when he locks my eyes.

We stay like that for a few more seconds with Emma’s arms wrapped around my neck and her face pressed against mine.

Slowly, I lean back into my chair with her, my cheeks warm with a blush.

“I love Anna...” Emma says, making me soft inside.

Jaden's lips flash a knowing smile.

Trailing my collarbones with her tiny fingers, Emma tilts her head up to get a glimpse of my face.

She studies me the same way he does, her eyes becoming gray like his.

I put on a brave smile as Jaden winks at me.

"You're a natural," he says, amused.

"Am I?"

Emma's hands migrate from my neck to my face and my lips.

"Emma wants to play," she says.

"Who do you want to play with?" I ask.

"Anna," she murmurs, her fingers threading through my hair.

I glance at Jaden.

Grinning, he shrugs.

"It's her call."

"Okay," I say.

I push out of my seat, put her down on the sand, and kneel in front of her. She picks up her tools, and I begin to organize them before we start building a sand castle.

Jaden's eyes burn holes into my face.

I glance in his direction.

He barely contains his laughter.

"Do I look panicked?" I toss at him jokingly.

He softly nods.

"I'm sure you can do it. Emma will help you," he says, sprawling into his chair and leaning back.

He closes his eyes. I pick the smallest plastic shovel and throw it at him.

Laughing, he peels his eyes open.

“Did you just set me up?” I ask.

First, he shakes his head, and then he nods a yes, utterly entertained.

“I’ve never built a sand castle,” I say.

He spreads his legs and gives me a cocky smile.

“You’ve built a multi-million dollar business. I’m sure you can build a sand castle.”

“You’re such a smart ass,” I mumble under my breath, shifting my attention to Emma, who watches me attentively.

“Ass...” she murmurs, echoing my word.

“Jazz...” I reply, trying to distract her.

Jaden barely suppresses his laughter.

I throw him a glare, and then I roll my eyes.

He starts laughing like an ass.

“Smart jazz...” I say to Emma, trying to keep my voice even.

She looks at me, confused. Swiftly, she makes up her mind and starts clapping her hands, singsonging.

“Jazz... Jazz... Jazz.”

Jaden straightens in his chair and opens his mouth, ready to give me some advice. I flick my hand up, and he keeps his mouth shut, quietly chuckling.

For a good half an hour, we build a sand castle that looks horrible. Seemingly, I’m the only one concerned with esthetics, and Emma has a lot of fun.

Sara shows up around noon.

She wears a sleeveless white dress with a tailored top, a flared bottom, and strawberry embroidered pockets that add a splash of color to her full skirt.

Her hair is tied into a ponytail.



“Has she behaved?” she asks, setting her beach bag next to the third lounge chair.

“Yes, she has. She is a good girl,” I say, shifting my gaze to Emma.

Just as I finish saying that, Emma pokes her sand-glazed fingers into my mouth.

“Emma. That is not food,” Sara says, rushing to pick her up. “I’m sorry,” she mutters, apologetic.

“I’m fine,” I say, with grains of sand stuck between my teeth.

“It’s time to take a nap, little lady,” she says as Emma loops her arms around her mother’s neck.

They pull away a moment later, Emma’s little hands waving at us.

I sink back into my chair.

“Afraid of kids?” Jaden asks, a faint smile on his lips.

I run a towel over my legs, brushing off the wet sand.

“No,” I say softly. “It’s just that I’m not used to them. But I like her. She’s a cool kid.”

“Yes, she is,” he says, flicking his gaze to the ocean.

We spend a few moments in silence, both looking at the ocean.

The water is calm and clear, cooler this time of year.

“You’re an unusual man,” I murmur, voicing a random thought.

“Why would you say that?”

He brings his gaze to me, a questioning look on his face.

I shrug.

“You’re so... I don’t know...” I say, briefly lowering my eyes.

My lips curl into a smile as I register his scrutinizing gaze.

“Dirty?” I say jokingly.

He laughs quietly.

“Hmm. Dirty you say...”

“Yes, in a good way.”

“Good to know,” he says, clasping his hands behind his neck.

A grin tugs at his lips.

“And what else?” he asks, shooting me a side-eyed glance.

My smile begins to fade.

“And different than other men.”

My voice draws his gaze to me again.

“You’re thoughtful and kind,” I say in a mellow voice. “At least to them, you are.”

He doesn’t comment this time.

“Two people live inside you,” I murmur.

“I could say the same thing about you.”

I shake my head in disagreement.

“My good side is not that strong.”

“Perhaps you haven’t had the chance to use it.”

“Maybe... I don’t know.”

“I’m not that special,” he says after pondering for a second.

“You are to me.”

He looks at me, intrigued. Unable to hold his eyes, I move my gaze over his torso.

“What’s the story of your scars?” I ask, tipping my chin and softly pointing to his chest. “Each tattoo sits next to a scar.”

He looks down and studies them as if seeing them for the first time.

I read sadness in his eyes.

He trails a few of them with his fingers.

“Every scar has a story,” he adds, his fingers trailing the ragged lines.

“This one was a flame lick...” he says, pointing to the small area on his flank just above the waistband of his swim trunks.

He glances at me.

“Jacob’s accident,” he says, his eyes darkening as the memory comes back to him. “He was on his bike, and I was in my car, following him. We were going home. At an intersection, he turned right. A car sped through a red light and snagged him. Threw him off. He slid onto the ground, and the bike spun and crushed him. He lost his conscience, and the motorcycle caught on fire, the flames spreading over him. I jumped out of the car and pulled him away from his bike, but it was too late. He never regained his conscience. That’s how I got burned,” he says, his fingertips resting on a small, satin-like patch of scar tissue.

I lift my gaze.

“What about the one on your chest?” I ask, pointing to the mark between his pecs.

He lets out a sigh and looks into the distance.

“That’s a long story,” he says quietly, his blue-gray eyes shifting back to me as he slowly runs his fingers through his hair, suddenly rueful.

A few moments of silence pass before he speaks again.

“Sara and I had a good childhood...” he says, weighing his words. “My family wasn’t rich by any stretch of the imagination, but we had everything we wanted. My parents loved each other and us. And they did the best they could for us. My father had a well-paying job that required him to work a lot and travel extensively. A sixty-hour workweek was the norm for him. He never had a health problem, yet one day he collapsed in his office and never made it home. The last time I

talked to him was that very morning. Proud, he hugged me and patted me on my back, congratulating me for a story I'd written and given him to read the night before. I never thought he'd have the time to skim it, let alone read it, but he did it somehow."

He trains his eyes on the small waves breaking against the shore.

"I was so happy that day," he says. "It was one of the best days of my life before it turned out to be the worst," he mutters, his voice almost breaking.

He flicks his eyes at me and puts on a brave face and a faint smile, yet he can't hide the soft quiver of his lips.

"It was one of those special moments when you know—even if you're only a kid—that the memory of that day will stay with you forever. I'd never written anything before, and it was only a simplistic story, but the fact that he had praised me meant the world to me."

His smile withers away.

"It was not much, but it was everything to me."

He pauses, fighting his emotions back.

"He was gone by the end of the day," he says coldly.

My eyes dip as he scraps his lip with his teeth.

"That's why I always say... You can never tell. There is no perfect anything. Life is all you can grab at any moment, no matter how imperfect it is. People like to plan and wait and pick and choose." He chuckles, shaking his head. "And while doing all that, life slips through their fingers and never comes back. Then one day, regret is all they have. All the things they didn't do or didn't love come back to them to haunt them. Whether was someone they could've loved or work they could've put their hearts into. A kid, a pet, or even an adventure. All those things are gone. Life is fluid. It comes and goes. There are no guarantees. There is no fairness."

With trembling fingers, he pulls a cigarette out of the pack. He tucks it between his lips and lights it.

His fingers rake through his hair, a long breath filling his lungs before he exhales.

“It all went downhill from there,” he says, his voice ringing out cold, simply stating a fact. “My mom’s job couldn’t pay the bills. We cut back as much as we could, and she got a second job, but it was still not enough. We struggled. She wouldn’t talk to us, but I knew what was happening to us... And her. After my dad’s death, she slipped into depression. She never asked for help and made a few bad choices... One of them was a man she hooked up with. Up to this day, I don’t know if she was looking for a rebound man or if she was just too scared to face life alone. His money helped for a little while, but he wasn’t our father and wasn’t a good man, to begin with. From that point on, things started to crumble. He began to abuse her verbally. Soon, their fights turn violent. This...” he says, running his hand across his chest, “is a blade I caught as I jumped between the two of them on a Sunday afternoon.”

He lets the silence grow, taking a drag on his cigarette. I watch the smoke flowing from his lips.

“What happened to her?” I ask.

A bitter smile creases his lips.

“I saved her life that day, but he got her eventually. She broke up with him, and things seemed to settle for a while, but he came back for her. One weekend, Sara and I went away. On Sunday evening, we found her dead in the kitchen when we returned home.”

My heart stops.

“He got sentenced to life without parole. I was seventeen, and Sara was fifteen. Within a year, we lost both our parents, and shortly after, we almost ended up on the streets.”

He takes a few long drags, the silence thickening around us.

“I’m not...” he says and then pauses, his lips flashing a sad smile, “as dirty as you think I am. Sex was a way to escape the harsh reality of my life. It wasn’t romance, and that’s exactly

why it did the trick. It kept me out of my head and away from my emotional turmoil. And it worked. It was the only thing going on for me when I had nothing and I was nothing. I was drowning, caught between life and death, struggling to survive. There was nothing I could hold onto. I had no way to pull myself up. When you're down, you're down. That's it. You're only a shell without a life. You don't live. You barely exist. At that point, I couldn't afford to feel much. Nobody wants you or needs you, let alone loves you when you are at your lowest point. That's why sex was my turf and my only power."

He takes a short drag and breathes the smoke out before putting his cigarette out.

"Anyway, that's my story," he says, guarded.

Without saying another word, he pushes out of his chair and heads to the ocean.

My eyes linger on his scarred, inked body until his arms are spread open, and he cuts his way through the water, diving into the sparkling azure ocean.



## SENNNA

"I CAN HELP YOU," I say, following Sara into the small kitchen.

Silently, I load up the dishwasher while she hands me the plates.

"Do you like living here?" I ask.

Glancing around, I take in the cozy place.

The beach house has two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and a lovely patio.

You can see the ocean from the porch.

“Yes. It’s much better than in the city. I’d rather live here if I had a choice.”

“What’s stopping you?” I ask.

“It’s not up to me. Emma and I depend on Jaden,” she says.

“And?”

“If something happens with his job, we need to move back to the city,” she says, handing me another plate.

“What could happen with his job?” I ask, baffled.

She smiles.

“Perhaps, I should rephrase it. If things don’t work out between the two of you.”

I slip the last plate into the dishwasher and carefully close the door.

“What do you mean?”

She wipes the kitchen table with a cloth as I lean back against the counter and fold my arms across my chest.

For a moment, my eyes follow the smooth motion of her hands.

A soft blush colors her cheeks.

“You said you are a friend of his, and he says the same thing, but I know you’re more than that. I see how you look at each other. And this sort of, um... thing leads to breakups all the time...” she says.

I freeze.

“I’m sorry if I’m blunt,” she continues. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I don’t have the luxury to sugarcoat it. It’s the reality.”

“No, no. There are no hurt feelings,” I say, rushed and nervous, a soft tremor claiming my fingers. “I completely understand,” I say, my voice suggesting something different.

Quietly, she rights the chairs.

“Well... Even if it happens, it won't affect his job,” I say in a shaky voice.

She straightens and folds the kitchen cloth before setting it on the kitchen counter.

Her eyes come to mine.

“Not if he wants to leave,” she says, and my heart clenches.

My lips stay shut, tension clawing at my chest. I look at her, unable to speak.

Her facial expression shifts as she quickly changes the subject when she registers my reaction.

Minutes later, she sits at the kitchen table and starts working on her laptop while I head to Emma's room, still unable to shake off the feeling stirred up by the conversation I just had with her.

I push the door open.

Sprawled on the bed, Jaden reads Emma a story while she cuddles up to him.

He studies me briefly.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah...” I say, nodding softly and slipping into a chair not far from them.

His voice is soft and gentle, his eyes glinting— pure like hers—as he reads to her.

Her eyes follow the movement of his lips with unbridled interest before she shifts her gaze up and gapes at him, her hands touching his face with veneration.

I observe them in silence.

His words become a soft hum in the background while I examine his features, now showing so much tenderness.

He's not an easy man to love. He bears too many scars. His heart's a graveyard. And yet, I'm falling hard for him.



He flicks his eyes at me again, studying me while telling her the story. Emma's eyes get smaller and smaller; her eyelids are heavy with sleep.

A moment later, her soft breaths trail across his chest. He lets her slide onto her bed and tucks her in.

Quietly, he motions to me, and we exit the room.

# S ENNA

WE SAY GOODBYE TO SARA, climb into the car and head home.  
We spend long minutes in silence.

“So... What happened to you?”

“Nothing,” I murmur, my forehead pressed against the window.

“You were in a good mood before I went to Emma’s room.”

I stay silent.

“Did you talk to Sara?”

I cut my eyes at him.

“About what?”

He flicks his hand up.

“I don’t know. Girls shit.”

“That sounds bad. No, I didn’t.”

We lock eyes again.

“You’re lying,” he says.

I look away.

“She said she wouldn’t be able to live here if you lost your job.”

I move my eyes back to him.

He smiles as if it’s a good joke.

“Are you planning to fire me?” he asks, still grinning. “No. She was afraid that we might, you know... split?”

“Are we an item now?” he asks, amused.

“It’s not funny.”

“I think it is,” he says without looking at me. “We can’t split if we’re not together, so why are we even having this conversation?” he asks, steering the car off the highway.

“You’re probably right,” I say, suddenly in a bad mood.

I keep my mouth shut for the rest of the trip, and as soon as we stop in front of my house, I climb out and rush inside.

I pace inside the bedroom, registering every sound of the house as he walks in. The main door shuts closed on the first floor. Then his footsteps travel across the living room and up the stairs. The floor creaks beneath his boots as he nears the bedroom.

The door slides open.

“What the hell was that?” he thunders, his eyes spitting fire.

“Nothing,” I say, peeling off my jeans and T-shirt.

I spin around, heading to the shower.

He slams the door shut and blocks my access to the bathroom.

“I’m not a mind reader, Senna. If there’s something you need to tell me, you have to spit it out.”

“I can’t tell you,” I say curtly as I try to push him to the side. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to change.”

“No, you don’t,” he barks.

He yanks the robe from my hand and throws it on a chair before reaching back and pulling off his T-shirt.

“No... No... I’m not doing this,” I say.

“Oh... yes... yes. You’re fucking doing it.”

The belt slips through the loops under my incredulous eyes.

“That’s not how you argue, Jaden.”

“There’s nothing to argue about,” he retorts. “You just said it. You can’t talk. Fine by me. Let’s fuck then.”

He pulls my wrists together when I expect it the least and ties them tight.

“Don’t do this, Jaden.”

“And why is that, Senna?” he sneers.

His fingers clip my chin as he locks my eyes.

“You know who I am, Senna,” he growls. “You need to grow up and stop acting like a girl. Don’t fuck with me as if I’m some fucking teenager. I don’t care if we’re a couple, but if we fuck and get to tell each other our life stories, then let’s be open about shit. All right?”

I nod.

“Good,” he grunts.

With one move, he shoves me into an armchair.

He pulls a pocket knife out of his jeans and slits my bra and panties open. They land on the floor.

“Open your legs,” he barks, my skin burning from his eyes.

I do as I’m told, my legs hanging over the armrests.

My folds part, cold air lapping at my flesh. He throws a glance between my legs, which makes me clench inside.

“You’re like a two-way street, Senna. Going both ways at the same time. You say one thing and feel another.”

He kneels in front of me, his hands curling around my hips as he jerks me closer to him. Losing my balance, I fall on my back— my knees going up, bent in the air, my wrists tied above my head.

“I so wanted this,” he says and licks the flesh between my folds, his fingers smoothly entering me.

“Mmm...” I moan and curve my back, rolling my hips toward his mouth.

His tongue strokes my swollen clit, and then he gently bites it. A growl vibrates in my chest.

“This is crazy...” I murmur as he pulls his fingers out and shoves his tongue inside me.

I bring my hands to his head and thread my fingers through his hair.

“Don’t stop...” I growl.

Just as I come closer to it, he moves his hands and mouth away.

“Fuck.”

I flip my eyes open and glower.

“Don’t you fucking do that,” I say.

Smiling, he pulls me upright, bringing my mouth to his groin level.

His zipper goes down. Slowly.

“Are you serious?” I blurt, not in the mood to get played with right now.

He slides his jeans down—teasingly slowly—his cock jutting in the air, rock hard.

Just as I part my lips to speak, he shoves two fingers into my mouth. My nostrils flare, and my taste buds tingle with pleasure from my arousal.

“Jerk,” I mumble around his fingers.

He laughs.

“Good girl,” he says as I suck on them.

He pulls them out and runs them down his cock, coating the smooth skin of his hardness with the moisture of my mouth.

My eyes are glued to his glistening shaft.

“You look like you want it,” he says, moving his hand up and down, tossing a cocky smirk at me.

I swallow a snippy remark, dawning on me that this is not the best time to get clever with him.

“I do. Yes, I do. And I want much more,” I throw at him. “But you are not willing to give it to me.”

He tilts his head back, his smile withering away.

“Why don’t you try me?”

I wonder how much seriousness his words bear when he brings his hand to my head, interrupting my train of thought.

I lick my lips in anticipation.

“Patience is not your virtue,” he says.

“Not when you leave me hanging.”

“You could do the same thing, sweetheart.”

That’s a hint I have no time to explore and analyze as he slowly trails the seam of my mouth with the tip of his cock, distracting me again.

And then he pulls away.

“You’re an ass,” I say.

A crooked smile is his answer.

“Speaking of which... Where do you keep the lube?”

“I don’t have any lube here. I don’t fuck at home.”

“You no longer fuck at home.”

“No longer... Whatever... I don’t have any.”

“Hmm... That’s gonna hurt.”

“No, it’s not. I’m not taking it in my ass,” I say.

“Oh... You will, sweetie... Sooner or later, you will.”

The silky head of his cock enters my mouth, pushing back my retort. My focus shifts as I swirl my tongue around him.

He pulls back, grunting, and slowly stroking his length.

His expression changes, softening his features, the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips.

“Tell me, Senna. What exactly do you want from me?”

“More. Are you willing to give it to me?”

He cocks his head to the side, his grin giving me a hot flash.

“Are you?” he asks in response.

Slowly, he rakes his teeth over his lip.

I ponder my answer.

“Probably not,” I say sincerely.

“Cool, baby. Then let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

He cups my face and pulls me toward him.

Moaning, I suck on his hard meat.

“That’s good, baby.”

He tears the belt away from my wrists. My hands rush to touch him.

“You give good head,” he says, caressing my face with his fingers, then sliding them into my hair as I pull him deep into my mouth.

“You’re dirty like me and have just as much to forget,” he says seriously this time.

With those last words, he scoops me up and carries me to the bed. He lays me on my back, and I open my legs, his body sliding smoothly on top of mine.

Spellbound, I get lost in his magnetic eyes while he fills me with his hardness.

My hands glide down his back before grabbing his butt while his lips crash onto mine, pulling me into a deep kiss.

Pleasure rams through me as I lose myself in him. He breaks the kiss, his eyes harboring fire.

“Come for me, baby...” he purrs, his nasal voice carrying a slight rasp.

I close my eyes and welcome him as he crashes his hardness into me, and we ride that high as we fiercely come.

Late at night, we fall asleep, arms wrapped around each other, a good feeling in my heart.



JADEN

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

Anxiety pulses in her voice.

“Out,” I say, glancing in the mirror.

Tipping my head back, I run my hand through my hair while taking a quick inventory of my black shirt, dark stonewashed jeans, and boots.

She prances around me, her hands on her hips, her lips pursed as she takes me in.

I look in the mirror, waiting for her gaze to lift from my butt.

“What do you mean out?” she asks, locking my gaze.

A frown stretches across her brow.

“As in out. What’s so hard to understand?”

She looks at me, intrigued and baffled at the same time, unable to figure out whether I’m serious or not.

“Can I come?”

“Did I invite you?”



She stares at me, completely thrown off.

I cock an eyebrow.

“No...” she says, hesitant.

“Then no,” I say coldly.

“What time will you come back?”

“Don’t wait for me.”

The light dies out in her eyes, her mouth pulling slightly open as her lips begin to tremble. I snatch the car keys from the kitchen counter and head to the garage.

I hurl one last glance over my shoulder, enough to register her pale face and the worry in her eyes. She looks small in her sweatpants, and the cropped top wrapped around her chest.

We lock eyes one more time before I vanish out the door.

Half an hour later, I pull in front of Jill’s.

I stop the car, turn off the ignition and scan the parking lot. Engine running, a police car blocks the entrance, and cops stand on the sidewalk.

I climb out of my ride and swing by them as I enter the building. Swiftly, I skim the crowd inside before veering to the bar and sliding into a seat.

“Hey. What can I get you, man?” Scott asks, his eyes scanning my face briefly.

“Guinness.”

Within minutes, he sets the beer on the counter.

“The place cleaned up nicely,” I murmur after taking a drink.

He ticks his chin, motioning to the cops outside.

“Yeah... I saw them,” I say.

“Hey, beautiful.”

A voice I don’t recognize echoes behind me, traveling to my side. I flick my head up and give the woman a glance.

“Do I know you?” I ask.

She rests her hand on my wrist, her chest brushing against my arm. Clad in a skintight dress and high heels that make her a bit wobbly, she gives me a come hither look.

A mane of platinum blonde hair frames her delicate face, blue eyes, and red lips, enlivening her features.

She reminds me of a high-end hooker; if cops weren't outside, I'd almost believe her.

Her hand slides down my arm before smoothly slipping to my thigh. Leaning against me, she brings her lips to my ear as if she wants to tell me something, and then she flicks her hand up and gives my cock a long tug.

I stifle my reaction, my eyes sinking into hers.

“I'm looking for some fun. And you come highly recommended,” she says under her breath.

I peel her hand away from my groin.

“Do I?” I sneer.

This isn't even subtle.

Brazenly, she slides her fingers back to my fly. I grip her hand and tear it off my groin for the second time.

“You give public service a new meaning, darling. Why don't you go outside and join your colleagues?”

It takes her two seconds, and her smile drops from her face. She purses her lips and throws me a vitriolic look before straightening her back and pulling away.

“What did she want?” Scott asks.

“She was fishing. A cop.”

I toss my drink back, leave the cash on the counter and take the back exit, rushing out of the establishment.

The air is crisp, and a big, sullen moon reigns over the clear, dark sky.

Twenty minutes later, I stop by my house. The place is sunk in darkness.

I park the car in front of my place, and for a few moments, I just sit there, lights and engine turned off. Staring as if I were looking at a postcard from the past.

I watched this place crumble for years, switching from days of joy and light to nights of sorrow and despair. Stripped of all the good things that once had made its heart, the place died a silent death.

Nothing could've warned me back then that I'd change with it— crumble with this place—and that I'd get broken, torn apart, and put together by the darkness, not the light.

As a teenager, I was curious, trustful, confident, and eager to learn. The world belonged to me back then, and I was loved, and love made me feel safe. It also made me dream big.

I had so many ideas I wanted to explore and so many questions I wanted to ask, and so many dreams as I believed in my future.

I wasn't shy, and I was far from perfect. I was naughty and got up to some serious mischief, but I never crossed the line.

I spent time at home whenever I could. I read a lot and drew a lot. I also liked sports and girls, and I had many friends. Jacob was like a brother to me.

We buddied up and did a lot of things together, teasing Sara while keeping secrets from her. That changed a lot later, when we all grew up, and she captured Jacob's heart.

He was the first man she had and loved, and she was his first love and only woman. Their story was so beautiful it belonged in a book.

Then everything came crashing down.

When my dad died, a dark shadow fell over the world. I didn't cry— I couldn't—yet my heart drowned in madness. The world I so much loved had let me down and crushed me while teaching me the harshest lesson.

Permanence is an illusion.

It broke me to see my mom's life shift for the worse. It killed me to see her dying, little by little, every day. She didn't

have enough strength to pull herself back up, and no faith was left in her, and that's how her life got off the rails.

Her poor choices destroyed her life and impacted us, unknowingly dragging her toward a brutal ending.

It took me a while to get a grip on that reality.

For the most part, I felt guilty because I couldn't help her mend her heart. Desperation tore through me when I realized she was forever lost to us. That warm, vibrant woman who raised us was no longer with us.

She died inside the same day my father did.

I can only imagine the pain she must've felt and the remorse, knowing she'd leave us behind.

I got a taste of that pain. I know how deep it runs and how deadly it is. I know how hard it is to cope with it.

I never blamed her. And I was never angry with her.

The rest came easily.

Once the world started to crumble around me, I became numb and ready to roll with my new life.

I didn't care much about anything, and I no longer had much to lose, or at least that's what I thought back then.

When that man touched me for the first time, it didn't feel as if he was the one who messed me up. I was already screwed up.

It didn't stir the slightest emotion in me. It didn't make me feel less than I was.

Besides, I was already gone.

There was no connection between my soul and the external world. It was all shattered.

He didn't hurt me.

He couldn't have hurt me since I was no longer there.

I knew I had to help Sara and later Emma, and I did my best to protect them. They were my only family, and I loved them with all my heart, but my feelings were bittersweet

because once you have your deep love for someone ripped apart, you never dare to love that way again.

The fear that one day I could lose them too stayed it me, regardless of how irrational that feeling was.

Jacob's accident did nothing but cement my beliefs. And that was the end.

From then on, I never let myself love again, and after a while, I learned to live without that feeling.

And everything got simpler, really—to sell my body and let the men touch me to satisfy their hunger, get into fights and experience pain so I can feel alive, and last but not least, be ready to leave everything behind at a moment's notice.

I've been living on the fringe, a prisoner of my fucked up life, for some time now.

All alone.

It wasn't something I could share with anyone else. Not even with Sara. Especially Sara, who had to mend her own heart.

Luckily, she's past that heartache, and now she has a future to look forward to. She has her education, and she has Emma.

Perhaps she'll find another man someday.

For me, there's not much left. A pile of memories and dust. Why would I bring that crap into someone else's life?

I shift my gaze up and down the street. The sidewalks are empty, sparse lights coming from the lampposts.

I step out of the car and stride to my old place. A few stairs later, I unlock the door and walk into the house.

Most of the furniture, clothes, and Emma's toys are already at the other place. I gather a few paper pads, all filled with the drawings I have made for Emma. I collect a few more toys and empty a drawer of bakeware. I shove everything into a duffel bag and a box and slip out the door.

Swiftly, I lock the door and saunter back to my car.

A few moments later, I pull out of the driveway, death, and sadness looking at me through the small, dark windows of the house.

It feels as if I just left a graveyard.

# JADEN

“YOU’RE the only person who likes to bake in the middle of the night,” I say, pitting cherries and eating every other one.

Sara’s eyebrows knit into a frown as she glances at the fruit.

“That’s all I have for the pie.”

“Got it,” I say, popping another cherry into my mouth.

She takes the bowl out of my hands and slides it to her side.

“It relaxes me,” she says. “You’re here. Emma’s sleeping. What else is there to do if not bake a pie?”

Smiling, she takes a rolling pin and spreads the dough on the table before lining a pie pan with it. It’s warm in the kitchen and smells like cherries and vanilla, reminding me of home, my childhood, and my mother.

“I miss being with you and Emma,” I murmur.

Her eyebrows lift, a baffled look sliding over her face.

“Trouble in paradise?”

I lock her eyes briefly.

“No.”

She places the cherries on the dough and sprinkles them with sugar. Then she creates an artful lattice from the dough on top of the fruit.

“What is it then?”

“I don’t know... I guess I miss a real home.”

She puts the pie dish into the oven, turns to the table, and sits across from me.

“How is her place?”

I lean back and clasp my hands behind my head, softly grinning.

“Great... If you are into designer homes that look like no one has ever truly lived there.”

A small smile brushes her lips.

“What about her? How is she?”

I straighten and unclasp my hands, curling my fingers around my beer. I bring the bottle to my lips, a grin tickling my lips.

“Twisted... And hot,” I say before taking a swig.

“That’s hard to miss. She’s beautiful. Why does it sound like it’s a problem?”

I set the bottle on the table.

“It’s not. It’s just that I don’t know how far we can go,” I say.

Concern rolls over her eyes.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” she says, disappointed.

I stare blankly at my beer.

“The thing is, I’ve never been with anyone before. And I don’t know if I can be too close to her. She’s far from being whole.”

She takes a sip of tea.

“What do you mean?” she asks, setting the cup on the porcelain saucer.



Our eyes connect.

“She had some family issues.”

“What kind of issues?”

“She got in some sort of disagreement with her family a few years back. She left her parents’ home and struck out on her own. She did well for herself. She hadn’t been in touch with them until recently. I met her family. They couldn’t have had more disdain for me even if they tried. They didn’t know who I was and despised me. That pretty much sums it up.”

“Does she like you?”

“Yeah... I think she does, but that doesn’t mean anything. Things can change, you know.”

“I think it’s more than liking for her. It’s not her I’m worried about. And I told her that as well,” she says after a moment.

I glance at her, surprised.

“What exactly did you tell her?”

She gives me a pointed look, reminding me of my mom.

“I told her you might leave.”

The blood drains out of my body.

“Why would you tell her that?”

Her chair scrapes the floor as she pushes to her feet and pivots to the oven. She runs an expert eye over the pie before returning to the table and sinking back into her chair.

“Because it’s the truth. I don’t know if she’s the woman for you or not. If she is, it has to be more than a good fuck between you two. I don’t see you falling for that thing only.”

“How do you know it’s not more than that?”

“Had you fallen for her, you wouldn’t be here with me, missing being in my kitchen. You’d be home with her.”

I study her.

“What did she say when you told her that?”

“She blanched. Like you now, and she looked as if her heart had stopped. That’s why I said you mean a lot to her, but I don’t know if that’s enough to make you stay.”

I chug more beer.

She searches my eyes.

“Am I right?”

“You probably are,” I mutter. “It’s not as if I want to leave.”

“I know you don’t.”

“I care for her, but there are other things bigger than us.”

“What things?”

“Money for one. She’s made a lot of money. She struck gold with an online venture that curates content and cashes in on advertising. The traffic is huge and the money pouring into her bank account reflects that. On the other hand, I wouldn’t make the money I make right now if it wasn’t for her. Nowhere in the real world could I make that amount of cash without education and solid work experience.”

She muses.

“Are you good at it?”

“Yeah, I am. But I want more than that. I want to make my own money. And not under her roof. It just doesn’t feel right.”

Her eyes turn dull.

“You don’t need to worry,” I say. “I’d never make a hasty move. I’ve started working on some side projects that may transition into something bigger and better. I’m not gonna leave her just to make a point. I like Senna. And I wouldn’t think about all of this had she not been important to me.”

“Let’s hope things will work out,” she says quietly.

“They will.”



JADEN

IT'S two o'clock in the morning when I roll the car through the gates and slowly steer it into the garage.

Quietly, I unlock the door and slip into the house.

The place is shrouded in darkness except for the faint light coming from Senna's laptop. I tiptoe my way through the living room, and just as I pivot toward the bedroom, I spot her sleeping on the sofa.

I turn around and stop next to the couch.

For a few moments, I watch her in silence. Lips parted, she breathes softly, her head propped against her arm, her features looking peaceful and relaxed in the pale glow.

Strands of hair brush her lips.

She looks innocent and pure.

That's who she must've been before her world came crashing down on her.

We would've been great together... Then.

A soft exhale escapes my lips before my eyes swing to the screen. I do a double-take.

What...?

Shit.

A couple of windows are still open, clips running on a loop.

In one of them, it's me— my hand curled around my dick, my fingers sliding up and down, my chest heaving.

In the other, it's that old flame of mine sucking my cock.

Her blonde hair sways as she bobs her head. The volume is turned low, but even so, I can hear her moans and my heavy breaths.

Nothing spells home like sharing personal porn with your sweetheart.

Damn it.

I swing my eyes to Senna.

Her body shifts, her eyes slowly peeling open. Sleep still lingering on her eyelids, she props herself on her elbows.

“Hey,” she says, blinking a few times, a bit confused.

She swivels and cranes her neck, trying to check the time displayed on the screen behind me.

Shifting my position, I block her view.

“Where were you?”

She glances up, irritated.

Her voice is hoarse and tinged with anger.

“What time is it?” she asks, trying to push me aside.

“Two o’clock,” I say, lowering myself to the edge of the couch, clearing her view.

She searches my eyes.

I motion to the laptop.

“What were you doing?”

She sinks her back into the pillow and crosses her arms across her chest. Her lips purse in discontent, her eyebrows pinching into a ragged line.

“The next best thing I can do when you are not home,” she says, not sparing me the sarcasm.

Quietly, I chuckle.

A small smile crawls across her lips.

“Were you touching yourself?”

“It wasn’t that good,” she sneers.

“Clearly. You wouldn’t have fallen asleep. Remind me to block you from my website.”

She laughs.

“No, no,” she says, grinning.

“Yes, yes.”

She goes silent, her expression changing as her hand slides over mine.

Her smile withers away.

“Where were you, Jaden?” she asks softly, concern pushing through her words.

My smile fades as well.

“Jill’s.”

The silence is so thick I hear the wind sweeping the windows and the distant clock ticking in the kitchen.

“Why?” she asks.

Panic flashes through her eyes.

I take her in for a few moments, and then I bring my hand to her face and run my fingers along her jawline, a small smile playing on my lips.

“It’s not what you think,” I murmur. “I had a drink before I went home to pick up some things for Sara and Emma. And then I went to Sara’s place.”

“How was it?”

“At Jill’s? Strange. Some undercover cop came on to me.”

Her eyebrows lift in surprise.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah... Someone must have ratted me out, and they tried to set me up. I was probably on their list.”

“Fuck, Jaden. Can they come after you?”

“No. I don’t think so. They would’ve done it already.”

“Was it a man?” she asks hesitantly. “The cop?”

Our eyes connect.

I breathe out a quiet chuckle.

“You’d think so, right? No. It was a woman...”

“Was she hot?”

“Yeah... She was.”

She purses her lips, irked.

“So what happened?”

“She gave me a hard-on before I brushed her off,” I say, keeping my mug under control while gauging her reaction.

She bites her lip, stifling her retort.

“Why would you go to Jill’s?” she asks, sadness washing over her.

“I didn’t go there looking for women.”

“Yeah, but that’s exactly what you found.”

“What can I say? I’m irresistible,” I say with self-deprecating humor.

She doesn’t taste it.

“Seriously. Why did you go there?”

“Comparing notes.”

“Meaning?”

“I wanted to see if I missed anything about my old life,” I say, the irony lost on her.

“And?”

“I didn’t,” I say, serious this time. “I didn’t expect that I would. It was rather unpleasant but also a relief when I realized I no longer had to do that for a living.”

Her hand slides to my thigh.

I glance at the laptop.

“So, you’ve waited for me...” I say in a softer voice.

Her fingers crawl on top of my hand. Her skin is soft and warm.

I flick my eyes to her.

A beautiful smile graces her lips.

“Yes, I have. I also cooked for you.”

I look at her, incredulous. She nods a couple of times.

“Yes. My first ever meal made from scratch.”

I glance at the kitchen and sniff the air a couple of times.

“It doesn’t smell like food.”

“That’s because the food is in the oven.”

“What is it?” I ask, curious.

“Lasagna.”

“You’re shitting me.”

She shakes her head, grinning.

“Nope.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say, teasing her.

“Why it’s so hard to believe?”

I breathe out a soft chuckle.

“Because it’s hard to imagine you in the kitchen. Your brain taking a break from work. How do I know you haven’t ordered the food?”

“You’ll know when you taste it. It’s homemade, and it’s really good.”

“How do I know it’s not your hot-ass chef who cooked it for you?”

She flashes an amused smile.

“Stop fucking with me, Jaden. It was not my chef. Besides, he no longer works for me.”

“Since when?”

She smiles.

“How come you didn’t tell me?” I ask.

She laughs.

“I just did.”

“Because I pressed you.”

She waves me off.

“Whatever.”

“I hope you didn’t fire him on my account,” I say.

“No, I didn’t. He moves to Italy in a few weeks and plans on spending some time there. He also shared a few of his recipes with me.”

“Hopefully, it wasn’t part of some trade,” I say, the image of the dark-haired, good-looking man with olive skin flashing in front of my eyes.

Her eyes twinkle with a naughty smile.

“No, it wasn’t. Are you jealous?”

“Do you want me to be?”

Smiling, she bites her bottom lip and nods a couple of times.

“Yes, I am,” I say, amused but also serious.

“Good,” she says, cheerful.

“So are we gonna eat or what? It’s only two o’clock in the morning.”

A mischievous grin lights up her eyes.

“Yes, we will, but first...” she says, pushing upright and propping herself on her arm, “I want to do something else.”

She shifts her position, folds her legs under her, leans to me, and slides her hand to my groin.

Her eyes follow the smooth motion as she splays her fingers over my bulge.

“Is this what she did?” she asks in a sultry voice before chewing on her lip and rubbing my cock through my jeans.

She strokes me methodically from my balls to my hard crown. This is so much different than what the cop did to me, but I see no reason to interrupt her.

“Mm-hmm,” I murmur.



Smoothly, she unfastens my belt, runs my zipper down, and slips her fingers inside my jeans. My hard shaft springs up into her hand.

“Don’t stop,” I say, spreading my legs and sinking my back into the sofa.

She pulls closer, her knees pressed against my thigh, her fingers wrapped around my girth, tenderly squeezing my hard flesh.

“Mmm. You’re really, really hard,” she says.

“That’s the whole fucking point, isn’t it?” I toss at her, observing her.

She slides her hand lower, grabs my shaft, and palms my balls.

“I’m pretty sure the cop didn’t do that,” she says.

Running my teeth over my lip, I catch her attention and purr.

“She sure didn’t.”

“That’s what I thought,” she says, flicking her hair over her shoulder and lowering her mouth.

I stop breathing as she parts her lips, flicks her tongue out, and slowly trails my shaft from the root of my erection to my bulging tip.

She looks up, and I do my best to keep my face straight as I twitch against her lips.

She does it again, firing up every fiber in my body.

“Damn it, Senna...” I murmur, threading my fingers through her locks and watching her lick me again and again.

She runs her tongue over her bottom lip while rolling her hand over my crown.

Tingles rush up my spine.

“Shit, it hurts...” I say, shifting in my seat to ease some of the pressure.

“I can do something about it,” she says before wrapping her lips around my meat and swirling her tongue around it.

“Oh, fuck...”

Propped on my hand, I tilt my hips up.

She makes sure she only strokes my tip.

Raising an eyebrow, I smile.

“You’re lucky I like you...” I say jokingly.

“Mm-hmm...” she mumbles around my dick, sucking on the tip like it’s a lollipop.

My fingers get tense on the back of her head.

She finally slides her lips down and uses her hand to spread the moisture, blowing me with passion and skill. The tension increases as she massages my hard-on.

Using her hands, she strokes my balls and rubs my dick, her lips gliding up and down.

“Oh, fuck...” I growl as she goes lower and lower, and I slide deep into her mouth, stopping only at the back of her throat.

I lift her hair to see her face.

She keeps her eyes closed and works me with her lips and tongue, giving me pleasure without rushing, loving every inch of me.

She looks like she’s slipped into a trance—her features stunning, her neck perfectly arched, her lips soft and swollen around my girth. The rhythmical motion is hypnotic— I admit— the pleasure par to none.

Her chest starts heaving as she gets aroused, her back curving slightly, her butt pushing out.

Holding her hair in my fist, I run my free hand down her back, finding a patch of bare skin between the hemline of her top and the waistband of her sweatpants.

A moan vibrates in her throat as I slip my hand inside her top and run my fingers up her spine, trailing her smooth skin.

Goosebumps rise beneath my touch.

She lowers her head, taking me deeper, and once she slides her mouth up, she presses her tongue against my length, swirling and flicking the sensitive underside spot, making it hard for me to hold back.

I run my hand down her spine and inside her sweatpants, slowly undressing her. She lifts her hips so I can slide the fabric past her rear and down her thighs before she props herself on her knees and keeps sucking my flesh.

I brush the spot beneath her legs and try to control myself, prolonging the pleasure while fueling the tension.

My hand is wet between her thighs.

“You do it just right, baby,” I say, slowly rocking my hips to fill her mouth.

She spreads her legs to give me more access, and I brush her lower lips before sliding my fingers into her.

She clenches around my touch.

I smile.

“You like that, don’t you?”

She nods, throwing me a side-eyed glance, her eyes gleaming with pleasure.

“Come here, baby...” I say, nudging her up.

She pushes off the sofa and rolls down her sweatpants, giving me a hungry gaze as I shed off my clothes.

I crash back onto the couch and move her to my lap.

Naked from the waist down, the bottom of her breasts peeking from under her cropped top, she slides her knees on either side of me.

My eyes slip to her slit, my cock twitching, hard and wet.

She sets herself astride, her warm, throbbing center gliding down my shaft.

She starts moving.

“Wait...”

Curling an arm around her waist, I hold her tightly as I shift the laptop onto the coffee table, ensuring the camera faces us.

“Give me a second,” I say as I handle the laptop.

The camera comes on with us on display from the neck down. I click the record button and lean back against the couch with her on my lap.

“What are you doing?”

“Homemade porn...”

“You’re not putting me on the Internet.”

“I’m not... But even if I am, nobody can tell it’s you.”

She cocks an eyebrow at me.

I flick my hand up.

“I won’t do it. I don’t want to get a letter from your lawyer,” I say, glancing over her shoulder. “Fuck me... That looks hot.”

She swivels her head and peeks.

Her eyes linger for a moment longer, her pussy pulsing with unbridled pleasure. She starts grinding, watching herself while doing it.

I grunt, my eyes rooted to the screen as well.

“You’re so hot,” I say.

Her eyes come back to me with a feral glint.

She takes my face in her hands and lowers her mouth before crashing her lips onto mine.

“Keep doing it,” I breathe into her.

She increases the pace.

“That’s fucking good,” I say.

I grab the back of her hair and hold her in place as I kiss her back.

When I tear my lips away from hers, I leave her almost breathless.

My eyes flick away from the laptop as everything becomes a blur. Her breaths roll faster and faster in sync with her moves.

I lock her in my arms, exploding under her.

# S ENNA

“IT LOOKS GREAT,” Harper says, swiveling her head and taking in the backyard.

Blooming shrubs and layers of flowers explode with color over the trimmed lawn. The water sparkles in the pool.

“It does, doesn’t it?” I say absently, bringing my coffee to my lips.

People have been working around the clock, manicuring the landscape, for the past week or so.

A soft breeze makes the water ripple.

“No more pool boys,” she says, smiling.

I move my gaze to her.

Stifling a grin, I set the cup on the table.

“No.”

Her eyes follow my hand and then flick at me, studying my expression briefly.

“You are lucky,” she says.

“Why would you say that?”

She tips her chin, motioning to the house.

“Because of him?” I ask quietly as Jaden briefly becomes visible through the glass wall.

“Mm-hmm.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do.”

The soft wind plays with her auburn locks. She runs her hand through her hair, combing it back in place.

Her peach dress sets a contrast to her eyes and glowing face.

Dipping my gaze to my hands, I ponder her words.

“It’s only a perception. I don’t feel lucky,” I say, swinging my gaze up.

Her smile fades.

“Why’s that?”

I shrug.

“I don’t know. That’s how things are. I don’t have an explanation for it.”

Silently, she picks a strawberry from the plate and pops it into her mouth. Her expression changes as she gets a taste of the sweet and sour aroma.

“He looks like the kind of man I always envisioned for you,” she says.

I chuckle.

“Really?”

“Yes,” she says.

“And what exactly is that kind?” I ask, amused.

She picks another piece of fruit.

“Hot as hell and ruling you with an iron hand,” she says.

I shoot her an incredulous look.

“Are you serious?”

A grin lines her lips.

“Of course I am.”

“What makes you think I need that?”

She runs a napkin over her lips and swallows the last piece of fruit.

“We’ve known each other for how long... Three, four years?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve always run and managed things. You’ve never let a man get close to you. Being in control all the time must’ve worn you out. I can’t imagine you with someone who needs guidance. One of those men who need to be mothered. I think you’d be truly happy with a man who takes the reins and leads you for a change,” she says, a trace of humor in her voice.

“Is that so, Harper?” I ask in a lighter tone as well.

She might have a point, though.

“You know it is so.”

“What makes you think he is that kind of man?” I ask as we both swing our eyes to the living room, where Jaden starts talking on the phone.

He smiles at me before shutting the doors and turning his back to us.

I bring my eyes back to Harper.

She’s still staring in that direction.

“I can tell.”

She brings her gaze back to me.

“That’s why I think you like him so much. Finding a bossy man is difficult when you’ve run things your entire life. He might just be that man. The way I see him, he can’t stand to have someone fawn all over him. It’s in his blood. He’s fiercely independent like you. He gives you what he gives you when he gives you, but only on his own terms. In between, he lives in a world of his own. The same way as you do,” she



adds, smiling. “You two are not the usual couple. I don’t see you finishing each other’s sentences anytime soon, although I believe your minds are connected.”

I look at her, intrigued.

“How do you know all that?”

She shrugs.

“I just know. I work with him, remember? And I know you. You two are like two worlds colliding. But at the end of the day, you’re still two different worlds.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good thing.”

“It’s probably the only way it works for people like you.”

“What do you mean people like us?”

She sips coffee and runs the tip of her tongue over her lip.

“I can’t speak for others, but I, for one, need to be joined at the hip with the other person. I wasn’t lucky enough to find that man, and that’s another story, but I like to do stuff with that person. Like all the time. I think most people are like that.”

“We do stuff together,” I say, glancing in the direction of the house, a bit baffled.

She sets the cup on the table.

“You work together. It’s not the same. And as I said before, you don’t need each other at that basic level. That doesn’t mean there isn’t some sort of bond between you two.”

A chuckle falls from my lips.

“That couldn’t be further from the truth,” I say, saddened. “You can’t bond with men like him.”

“Perhaps. Or maybe you need time.”

I laugh quietly.

“Yeah... sure,” I say, in a pensive mood.

The truth is, I can never tell.

All I know is that I sense him ready to pull away from me at any moment, and that's hardly reassuring.

"Who knows? I guess I'll find out someday," I say, staring vacantly at the house.

"If there's one woman well equipped to handle him, it's you, Senna," she says, scooping out a small mirror and her lipstick from her purse.

"Maybe," I say, my eyes following the slow motion of her hand as she applies the red lipstick.

She presses her lips together and glances in the mirror. Satisfied, she shoves everything back into her handbag.

"Thank you for the treat," she says, rising to her feet.

I follow her example and accompany her to the exit.

A few minutes later, I wave her goodbye while she backs away and steers her car out of my driveway.

For a few moments, I look up and down the street, taking in the trees, manicured landscapes, wrought iron gates, and homes peeking through.

Her car reaches the end of the street and takes a turn when my phone starts ringing. Puzzled, I glance at the screen. It's a New York number I don't recognize.

Evelyne comes to mind, but I dismiss that thought fast. There's no way she has my number. Adele is the only one who knows it, and she wouldn't give it to anyone without my permission.

I keep staring at my phone, pondering whether to pick up the call or not. I finally make up my mind and decide against it.

A second call follows shortly.

Something prompts me to slide my finger over the screen.

"Yes?" I ask hesitantly.

A pause comes first, and I instantly know everything I need to know.

I'm tempted to hang up. Instead, I look at the screen again.

I hear a long sigh and then his voice.

"You know who this is," he says, and my insides collapse.

My hands tremble.

"How did you get this number?"

His laughter echoes in my ear.

"Is that even a question?"

"Yes, it fucking is. This is not a public number. Nobody in my family has it."

"Let's say I have my sources," he says in a raspy voice.

My finger flies across the screen that very instant as I hang up on him. I expect him to call again.

He doesn't.

Shaken, I call Harper and instruct her to get me a new phone number. She takes all the information without asking questions.

Quivering, I walk inside.

Not far from the pool, Jaden sits at the patio table. His eyes are trained on me as I walk toward him.

"What happened?" he asks, playing with his lighter.

"Nothing," I say curtly.

"Sit with me," he says as I veer toward the house, trying to avoid him.

I glance at him. He motions me to the chair across from him.

I turn around, stride to the table, and take a seat.

Swiftly, I glue my eyes to the fruit platter, pretending I don't notice his scrutinizing gaze over my face.

He lights a cigarette. Slowly, he blows out the smoke, his eyes on me.

"What happened out there?" he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, Senna,” he says calmly yet assertively.

“It’s nothing important,” I say softly.

“Why are you spooked then?”

I’m doing my best to hold his gaze.

“I got a phone call from someone who said he knew me. I got a little nervous, and I instructed Harper to get me a new number.”

“Who was it?”

“I have no idea,” I say, my voice steady, my eyes still connected with his.

The lie is flawless—if you ask me—yet I’m not so sure he buys it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah...” I say quietly.

He pauses, taking a drag off his cigarette. Unhurriedly, he releases the smoke.

“Is there anything I should know?” he asks.

I lower my eyes and shake my head a couple of times, picking a slice of apple from the platter.

The silence grows while I wait to be challenged by him at any moment.

To my surprise, he doesn’t do it.

“Okay,” he says, his voice lined with suspicion.

“Listen...” I say, flicking my gaze up. “I’d like to take a break from work and go away for a few days. I want you to come with me.”

He looks at me, intrigued.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Up north,” I say, smiling faintly. “It’s cold and snowy this time of year, but the place I have in mind is beautiful.”

He tips his head down, glancing briefly at his hands before looking at me.

“What place?”

“Where I grew up. We can leave on Monday and return at the end of the week. You can still visit Sara next weekend.”

He narrows his eyes as he brings his cigarette to his lips and studies me intently for a few more moments, rendering me nervous.

Just when I’m about to push out of my chair and leave the table, he speaks again.

“Okay. We can go.”



## SENNA

THE ENGINE PURRS as the SUV rolls onto the snaking road.

Pine trees heavy with snow line the path, wisps of fog clinging to their branches, filtering the grayish light.

Log homes sit on both sides of the road, lit windows casting a faint glow over the ground.

“Do people live here all year round?” he asks, looking out the side window.

“Most of them are vacation homes, but some people do live here all year round.”

I shift my gaze to the scenery outside.

The wind plays with the snow flurries, spinning them before they touch the ground.

“I miss this kind of weather,” I say, my eyes trained on the beautiful surroundings. “This is the kind of winter I’ve always liked. Perhaps because it comes with silence, snow, and cold, long nights when it’s warm inside and time stands still.”

My eyes roam over the woods before I continue.

“Years back, when I was a kid, I came up with this little story. It was about a girl who walked out of her parents’ home one day and headed to the market with her mother. Once she got there, she quickly got distracted by the sounds and colors of the place, the people’s voices, and the smell of the food. As her mom started talking with a merchant, she took a few steps away from her and, spellbound, let her gaze rove over the sparkling trinkets, her nostrils filling with the smell of chocolate. The live music drifting through the air lured her farther away, and soon, she lost her sense of time and space. And before she knew it, the day drew to an end, and the evening set in. The place was cleared of customers, and the merchants started packing their things as they got ready to leave. She asked the people around if they had seen her mother, but no one could help her. Soon, the market closed its doors, and she hit the streets alone. Lost and hungry, thirsty and desperate, she wandered until she met a man. He was tall, dark-haired, and wore a black wool cloak. He seemed like a good man, but she was too young to tell the difference. He asked her what she was looking for. She told him she’d gotten lost and needed to find her mother. He promised to take her home, and she believed him. But he never did. Not to her home anyway. Once he had her at his place, he tried to convince her his house was her home. She knew he was lying to her, so one night, after they had dinner, she snuck out of his house and ran away. She didn’t have a plan, so she found herself back on the streets, wandering again. It was the middle of the night, and there was no one in sight. Discouraged, she hid behind a tree and hugged herself, murmuring a quiet prayer. She didn’t know much about prayers or who could help her, in fact, so she was praying to the dark night and the sparkling moon, to the whispering wind and the mysterious silence. She was praying to find a home. Any home. A safe place, so she could never get lost again...”

The whistling of the wind and the rhythmic sound of the windshield wipers sweeping the glass break into the silence.

“Did she find it?” he asks after a while, giving me a side-eyed glance.

“The little girl... Did she find her safe place?” he asks, searching my eyes.

Smiling, I turn my gaze back to the window.

“Yes, she did,” I murmur, staring vacantly into the darkness. “It was a nice home, hidden in the forest, draped in the snow in the winter, washed in the sunlight in the summer, wrapped in the sound of a trickling creek in the spring and the smoke of burning leaves in the fall. A place where the night, the moon, the wind, and the silence were her neighbors. A place surrounded by an invisible wall that kept her safe from prying eyes, so no one could see her, find her and lose her again.”

His stare burns into my face.

“Anyway... That is our place,” I say in a different voice, motioning to a log home wrapped in darkness.

He pulls the car to a stop, turns off the engine, and kills the lights.

The silence and the moaning wind surround us as the silver moonlight pours into the forest, making everything look surreal.

# S ENNA

SOFT SNOW DUSTS my boots with every step on the narrow path leading to the chalet. I climb the stairs, unlock the wooden door, push it open and enter the house.

I turn on the lights.

A warm glow rolls over the walls, illuminating the cozy kitchen and the spacious living room. A hallway makes the transition to the bedrooms and the bathrooms.

It's warm inside and smells like food.

Ceiling-height windows let in a beautiful view—snow-capped trees and mountain peaks in the background.

Jaden's steps echo behind me.

He sets the travel bag on a chair and looks around.

“Does anyone live here?”

“The caretaker prepped the house for us,” I say, peeling my gloves off.

“Is this place yours?”

“Yes. I inherited it from my grandparents, and I used to spend time here with them in the summers and the winters.”

I unzip my jacket and shrug it off, glancing at the fireplace. An armful of kindling and logs are stacked on the side.



“I’ll take care of it,” he says as I unpack.

He starts making the fire.

Soon, the flames lick the logs, and the smell of burning wood spreads through the house, following me into the kitchen.

I check the refrigerator first. It’s stocked. Pots with freshly cooked food sit on the stove. I hear his footsteps traveling from the living room to the bedroom, and I walk out of the kitchen and follow him around.

In silence, I watch him lighting another fire. From time to time, I glance around, taking in my surroundings.

The place looks the same.

A fluffy rug in the middle of the room next to a hand-crafted wooden bed. Plump pillows and a thick comforter piled up on the mattress.

“Where did you learn to light a fire?” I ask, my eyes trained on the dancing flames.

He straightens his back, his eyes rooted to the fire.

The smell of burning wood wafts through the air.

“I was born in Washington State, and it was one of the things my father taught me.”

“Interesting.”

He smiles.

“Yeah... I wasn’t always a hustler,” he says, musing.

For a few moments, we listen to the crackling fire.

“Do you miss that place?”

He shrugs.

“I don’t know. I never thought about it. I wouldn’t go back. I don’t think so.” He pauses for a moment. “Those were really good times,” he says, melancholic.

Minutes later, we exit the bedroom, and I head to the bathroom. Tall windows let in the stunning view surrounding

the house.

A shower booth and a sizable hot tub occupy most of the room.

I open a cabinet, scoop out a few candles and light them.

“What are you doing?” he asks, walking in.

“I’m getting the hot tub ready.”

“For?”

“For you,” I say, smiling.

“What about you?”

“I’ll set the dinner table.”

He looks at me, surprised.

“I wasn’t always a pampered, cold-hearted bitch,” I say.

“I never thought you were,” he murmurs. “What about we set the dinner table together. And then we get in the tub together.”

“Sounds good,” I say, a blush spreading over my cheeks.

Half an hour later, we eat at the table by candlelight.

He paces himself, sunk in thought.

I’ve never seen him rushing at the table.

From time to time, I steal a glance at him. The soft glow softens his expression.

He looks relaxed, and melancholy flashes through his gaze as I talk about the time I used to spend in this house as a little girl.

“So, do you like this place?” I ask, bringing the glass of wine to my lips.

“Yeah... I do.”

I sip the ruby liquid and set the glass on the table.

The sound of burning logs and howling wind tear into the silence from time to time.

“I’ve never been away from home this past five years,” I murmur.

“Me neither,” he says, staring blankly at the candle.

His voice is calm, lined with sadness.

“I couldn’t, for one, and then, I had no room in my life for anything else.”

I digest his words.

“What would you do if, um...?”

His gaze comes to me, an eyebrow slowly arching.

“Yes?”

“If you could do anything or change anything? What would you do?” I ask.

A thought gleams in his eyes.

“I’d change the past. Bring my parents back. And Jacob. Fall in love with someone for the first time,” he says, smoothly tearing his eyes away from me and leaving me cold. “I’d also like to erase my memory. I’d like to forget a lot of shit...” he adds, his lips moving into a rueful smile. “What about you?”

He swings his gaze back to me.

“Same... I’d change the past. Myself. I’d love to get a taste of real love... The kind that makes your heart flutter and stays with you forever... I’d also get a different set of parents,” I add sarcastically.

I expect a comment. Instead, he slants his gaze down and looks at his plate.

I swallow the last sip of wine.

“How was your first time?” I ask, sliding the glass onto the table.

He tips his chin up and lifts an eyebrow.

“You mean sex?”

I nod.

“Yeah... Sex, I guess.”

“There wasn’t much of anything else,” he says. “I fooled around with girls in high school, but my very first time was with one of my friends’ sister. She was older than me and had her eyes set on me for some time. One night she was home alone. My friend was supposed to come back from a trip, but he got stuck in another town with his parents. She let me in...”

He pauses.

“In more ways than one...” he says, a grin tugging at his lips. “She crammed everything she knew and wanted into that first night. I was always a fan of crash courses. And boy, did I pick it up fast. There was no emotion between us, only lust. The hormones were raging.”

He laughs.

“On both sides,” he says, amused.

He leans back in his chair and rests his hand on the table, playing with the lighter.

His eyes follow the motion.

“She knew exactly how she wanted to be fucked, and she was quite upfront about it.”

His eyes come to me. Detached.

“I couldn’t be happier. At that time, I thought she was every man’s dream.”

He shifts in his seat and leans forward this time, both elbows resting on the table.

“She wanted me back after that night. We fucked for a few good months before she left for college. I never heard from her again.”

He slips a cigarette between his lips and flicks it with his tongue, leaving it unlit.

“What followed wasn’t much different,” he says around his cigarette.

He lights it and takes a slow drag. Soft smoke rolls through his parted lips.

“Soon, I was the one who called the shots, but I never cared for anything else. I didn’t want complications. Not after I lost my family and my friend and saw my sister broken over his death. The rest... You know it,” he says and then goes quiet.



SENNNA

“WHAT ABOUT YOU?” he asks. Tilting his head back, he tosses me a small smile. “Anything you can talk about?”

I take a long breath.

“My first time was sort of an... accident,” I say, lowering my eyes for a moment. “No emotions were involved, and that’s how I learned not to look for them in a man.”

He gives me a puzzled look.

“You’ve never tried a regular hook-up?”

I shake my head.

“No. There were a few instances when I tried it, but it didn’t work out, so I gave up, and when I made enough money, I started to shop around.”

He tears his gaze away from me, guarded.

“That’s all. There’s not much else to talk about,” I say curtly, grabbing a couple of plates and rising to my feet.

He pushes his chair back and collects the rest of them.

“I’ll do it,” I say as I load the dishwasher.

He pivots away and opens the oven and then the refrigerator, searching.

“It’s in the box,” I say, motioning to the fridge.

He gives me a glance, a smile playing on his lips.

“It’s right there,” I say, pointing to a shelf. “There’s a chocolate cake in that box. Isn’t that what you are looking for?”

“Yes. How do you know?”

“You’re always looking for sweets.”

He pulls the box out as I grab a couple of dessert plates and slide them onto the table.

“I’ll do this,” he says.

He fumbles through the utensils in the drawer and pulls out a thin-bladed knife and a triangle-shaped cake spatula. He runs the knife under hot water.

“You’re serious about this business,” I say, smiling softly.

“I’m good with cakes.”

“And kids,” I say. And, um...”

Grinning, he sways his head from side to side, his eyes on the cake.

“No, no... I’m afraid that’s not true,” he says.

“What?”

He looks at me.

“I’m not good with women.”

Without elaborating, he moves his eyes back to the cake.

A slice of moist, dark, chocolate-glazed cake slides onto the plate. He hands it to me before cutting another slice for himself.

He licks his fingers, now sprinkled with crumbs, and my eyes fall to his lips.

That’s how I see his smile.

“Let’s take a seat.”

“Okay,” I mumble.

I grab my plate, set it in front of me, and sink into a chair.

We eat in silence.

“What is it, Senna?”

I glance at him.

A knowing smile flickers through his eyes.

“Nothing.”

He cocks his head to the side, and narrows his eyes, weighing me briefly.

“Okay. Let me rephrase it, then. You wanted me here. Why?”

I sense a harshness in his voice, which is a contrast to his eyes.

“There’s no particular reason.”

“You don’t do anything without a reason. You just said you haven’t been anywhere in a long time. So what’s the reason?”

He clasps his hands under his chin, waiting for an answer.

The candlelight plays in his eyes.

“Why can’t you talk to me?” he asks softly this time.

I weigh my words before I speak.

“You keep saying you’re not good with women, yet you are good to me.”

He shakes his head, a faint smile brushing his lips.

“No, I’m not. Not in the way you want me to be. I told you a while ago I don’t do romance... And you said you were fine with it. And you probably were. But it’s no longer enough for you. I can tell. The thing is, I can’t give you what you need, and I don’t want to lie to you either. ”

My heart pulses in my throat and in my ears.

“I know. I don’t expect anything from you,” I mutter dryly.

He bores holes into my face with his eyes before shifting his gaze to the window, not saying another word.

Suddenly, the room feels cold.

I push to my feet, tear away from the kitchen table and enter the bathroom. He doesn't follow me.

I shed my clothes and step into the shower, thoughts clashing in my head. They're mostly bad. Different degrees of bad.

Minutes later, I turn off the water, run a towel over my body and slip into a robe. My mood doesn't get any better as I walk into the bedroom. Sadness and regret grow in me with each step I take.

Perhaps this was a mistake. The biggest mistake of all.

All of a sudden, I feel bad for everything. The past and the present, the things I cannot change, and those no longer in my grasp.

Quietly, I walk across the room and edge to the window.

Flurries twirl in the air, looking like ghosts caught in a dance. My fingers trail the glass, my breath leaving mist in its wake.

A long exhale leaves my chest when I hear his steps behind me. His fresh scent hovers over me, filling my lungs.

He wraps his bare arms around me, draping me in his heat.

My smile flickers faintly in the window.

He slinks his hands beneath my hair, slips his fingers inside my robe, and peels it off my shoulders. The fabric crumples at my feet.

My eyes stay on the window, rooted to his faint reflection as he slides his palms over my breasts, and grows a path of kisses on my neck. One hand journeys to my stomach and then lower, cupping my mound. Slowly, I rock my hips, pushing my rear into his groin.

Hard and pulsing, he slides his length against me, his shaft hotter every time he does it. Palms pressed against the glass, I shudder with pleasure as he runs his hand between my thighs and spreads my legs open.



The tip of his cock trails the spot between my legs, making me clench in anticipation. His eyes follow the slow rocking of my hips as he keeps teasing me with his throbbing flesh.

Wet arousal rolls over him.

“You want it, huh?”

I nod in response.

He slowly drives his hardness into me, stretching me and filling me up, twitching against my walls.

I start to shake.

“Wait, baby...” he rasps, no longer moving, his lips pressed against my hair.

He lowers his mouth and trails my neck with passionate kisses, heat swirling around his erection.

He slightly rolls his hips and smiles against my skin as I eagerly move with him.

A shudder falls through me.

“Stay still. Let it come to you,” he says.

I do. The less I move, the more overwhelming the sensation becomes.

“That’s good,” he purrs, his hard flesh stirring inside me again.

He brings his fingers to my slit and touches my clit, a mere tease. Nothing more. My flesh swells and tingles, craving more of his touch.

Slowly, he shifts his fingers to my mouth and brushes my lips. Once. Twice. I sense the flavor of my wetness, and I want to taste it. He probes my mouth. I part my lips. My tongue gives his fingers a soft swirl and then licks them.

Pleasure surges through my senses.

He pulls back a little and thrusts. Deep. Hard. Crying moans roll off my lips as he rocks his hips and enters me all the way again. He slides in and out. Several times. Hard. Slow. And then hard again, driving me insane.

Panting, I arch against him, trying to quench the growing hunger inside me. His fingers journey to my mouth again. This time I clutch his hand and hold it to my mouth, wrapping my lips around his fingers.

I suck them and moan, my hips dancing with his.

“That’s good,” he says, a smile threading through his voice. “You want to suck a cock right now... A hard, fat cock....” he rasps, his heavy breaths fanning over my neck.

I almost choke on a groan as pleasure burns the flesh between my legs. I jerk back, crashing into him. His lips go down my neck again, his tongue swirling, his teeth grazing my skin. He rolls his hips and hammers me deep, his free hand strumming my clit.

Closing my eyes, I relish him taking me.

His hand iron grips my neck while his teeth draw sore lines on my shoulder. His hips sway again, slamming into me hard, flesh craving flesh, nothing but addictive pleasure.

Short bursts of air fill my lungs.

“Fuck me... Jaden...” I murmur, my voice breaking as my body jolts under his pounding. “Make me come...”

His hand coils around my neck as he fiercely pounds me. A low growl vibrates in his chest while the pleasure and relief start tearing me apart.

“Don’t stop,” I murmur.

He doesn’t.

He grips my hips and unleashes all that power coursing through his veins. I raise my eyes and stare at his reflection.

His eyes glint feral, his abs waving as he thrusts, his strong arms holding me against his pounding. Lips parted, he draws in sharp air intakes, his chest pumping.

He fucks me hard. And good. He frees my body and quiets my mind, sending me into a floating state.

I ride that high with him, our scarred hearts silently connecting to begin a secret journey.

# JADEN

“COME TO ME,” I say to her, pointing to the rug I’m lying on.

I look up at her as she carefully steps over my legs.

Smoothly, I tug at her hemline and untuck the towel, peeling it off her body.

She cups her tits, her lips tilting into a naughty smile.

“That’s cute,” I say, amused.

I roll onto my side and prop myself on my elbow, making room for her in front of the fireplace. My towel loosens around my hips.

Grinning, she lowers herself next to me and lies in front of me, her back pressed against my chest.

Unhurriedly, I run my fingers over her skin, splaying them over her stomach. A shiver falls through her as I cup her tits and kiss her neck.

Her skin gets warmer from the fire and from my touch.

“Too close to the fire?” I ask teasingly, caressing her.

She chuckles softly.

“Always,” she says.

She rolls to her back and rests her head on my arm, her gaze shifting up to me.

A slow grin parts her lips.

“What is it, baby?” I ask.

Her fingers come to my face, her index finger running gently across my lips.

“What would make you happy, Jaden?”

Her eyes gleam in the soft light, filled with questions.

“I am happy,” I say.

She looks at me incredulously, a small grin tugging at her lips.

“Your smile makes me happy,” I say.

“I was talking about you.”

“I’m happy when people who matter to me are happy. It’s that simple.”

“So, I matter to you...?”

A swarm of emotions flits through her eyes.

“Yes, you do,” I finally say.

She pushes up and props herself on her elbows, her lips inches away from mine.

“You matter to me, too,” she says quietly, no longer smiling.

I tenderly cup her face, my thumb tracing her cheek as my eyes delve into hers.

“You matter a lot,” she says softly—almost whispering—her words meshed with a shred of pain.

“I know.”

Tears cling to her lashes as her lips begin to quiver.

“I’m happy when I’m with you,” she says. “I’ve never been close to anyone before I met you, other than perhaps my grandparents when I was little,” she adds in a shaky voice.

Stroking her hair, I smile, yet sadness grows in me.

“I’m not the man for you, Senna...” I say quietly.

Her eyebrows tilt up, her lips parting in surprise before her eyes darken.

“Not yet...” I say. “We both know it.”

Her expression changes again, a sliver of hope flashing through her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean anything other than what I just said. I don’t want to be away from you, and I don’t want to be with other women or go back on the streets. Besides my family and Jacob, I’ve never been close to anyone either.”

I pause.

She thinks about it.

“But?”

“I wanna make it right for you. I’m not a man of half-measures. And I’m a loyal man. But right now, Sara and Emma are my priority, and I don’t want to lie to you or hide it from you. .”

She studies me.

“I don’t expect it to be otherwise,” she says.

“Then you must know I can’t make a promise I can’t keep.”

She presses her lips together, struggling with the trembling of her chin. Her gaze tears away from my face and slides down. She no longer looks at me.

“On the other hand...” I say, summoning her eyes to me again.

She tilts her face up.

“You know that we are good together...” I say, giving her a flirting smile.

A grin brightens her eyes.

“That’s because you are good,” she says.

“I’m not so sure about that... I’m not the one who hired professionals and garnered all that experience,” I toss at her, amused.

“You are the professional,” she jokes.

She leans to me and smiles against my lips while I curl my hand around her neck and pull her close to me.

We share a tender kiss before I murmur against her lips.

“You should fear nothing, Senna. All I need is time...”

She wraps her arms around my neck as we connect our lips again. My blood speeds up, flooded with pleasure, as she slinks her hand beneath my towel and curls her fingers around me.

Her thigh slides up my hip.

Her moan vibrates in my mouth as I push my fingers into her, her flesh throbbing.

She shudders.

I break the kiss.

She looks at me with vacant eyes, her hand running up and down my length, her hips grinding as her chest begins to heave.

“That fast...?” I purr against her lips.

Her wetness coats my fingers.

I pull them out and fill her with my hard meat, her moans of pleasure raising goosebumps on my arms.

A faint smile lines her lips as she sinks her nails into my arm. Thrusting into her, I watch her quickly scaling up.

Right on the cusp, she closes her eyes and presses the back of her head against my hand. I pick up the pace, my gaze dipping to her lips.

The peak of tension hardens her muscles. Her body arches against mine, her breasts getting crushed against my chest, her pussy soaking me.

I take her mouth.

Her chest vibrates with a growl as her tongue sweeps mine.

Hungry, voracious, and trembling, she sucks on my tongue, branding me with her nails.

She squirms and moans in my embrace, tipping over the edge as I hammer her relentlessly. She tears her mouth away from mine, her throat filled with a crying sound.

“Come, baby...” I say as another orgasm sweeps through her, stronger than the first.

Lines of blood grow on my back from her nails.

That’s when I come undone.



SENNA

“JADEN?”

The howling wind groans in response.

All I see is the thick darkness and the string of flickering lights leading to the neighbor’s house.

Fresh snow crunches beneath my boots, the long-sleeved T-shirt not doing much to protect me from the frigid air.

My breasts turn into mounds of ice.

I hug myself and swivel my head, scanning the woods again, searching for him.

“Jaden?”

“Yes.”

His voice rings out behind me.

Startled, I jolt.

“Fuck. You scared the shit out of me. Where were you?”

“I got the car ready for our trip back.”

Clad in boots, jeans, and a long-sleeved T-shirt like mine, he walks into a patch of light.

I'm shivering.

He barely flinches.

His eyes dance with a smile.

I run my gaze over him again. The cold air adds color to his face, showing off his sculpted cheekbones. Silver sparkles in his eyes borrowed from the moon.

"You look at me as if you've never seen me before," he says.

"There's something different about you."

I let my eyes linger on him a little longer, taking in his handsome face.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," I say, stifling a smile.

"You're such a fox. Tell me."

I clear my voice.

"Nothing. Dinner is ready. I want to eat. Aren't you hungry?"

He stomps the snow off his boots.

"Yes."

I slip inside.

He follows me.

"Smells good," he says, eyeing the table.

I give him a secret smile.

"What is it?" he asks, grinning.

I keep smiling.

"Oh, I know..." he says, looking around. The smell gives it away. "Which one is it?"



“Well, both. Chocolate cake and apple pie. One is in the fridge, and the other one is in the oven. We eat first,” I say, sounding all, um... maternal?

He locks my eyes and cocks his head at me.

My hands shoot up.

“Sorry...” I say, smiling.

Minutes later, we sit at the table.

I spent some time decorating, and now everything looks festive. It’s something Isabel and I used to do in my parents home when my mother felt generous enough to let us mingle with the staff members.

An hour ticks by, and the room is filled with laughter, reminding me of the way this place used to be when my grandparents and I spent the winters here.

I had no idea how funny he could be and what a vital force hides inside him.

It’s been a week.

The start was rocky—I’m not gonna lie—but things got better. His eyes no longer harbor sadness, a vibrant man coming to life. He’s smart and playful, his zest for life revving up a part of me I no longer thought I had.

We fuck, then we make love, and then we fuck again.

I’m addicted to him while he gets turned on at the sight of me. The nights we share are silent, buried in snow, and wrapped in soft lights.

We spend most of our evenings in front of the fireplace. He writes and draws.

I read.

Every time I glance at him and study him longer than a few moments, he slams the laptop shut, pulls me to his lap, and lets his body do the talking.

I respond to his voice, smile, and the glint in his eyes. I yearn for his touch and lips. And his cock to fill me up.

I've been starved for someone like him for so long there is no end to my hunger. The more he feeds me, the stronger my craving for him grows.

Tonight is no different.

We eat dinner, and an hour later, we find ourselves in the living room.

I lie on the couch with a pillow behind my back and my tablet on my lap while he sits in his armchair, his ankle resting on his knee.

In one hand, he holds a paper pad. With the other, he handles the laptop.

His eyes dash at me.

"What are you looking at?"

I breathe out soft laughter.

"I wouldn't have pegged you as someone who's reading, writing, and drawing."

He twists his lips into a mischievous smile.

"Enjoying a quiet evening at home," I add, amused.

"I can say the same thing about you."

"It sounds... uneventful..." I say.

"And yet, it feels good."

He slips the paper pad onto the table and starts typing on his laptop.

His eyes fly to me from time to time.

"I've had enough of an eventful life. I can fill a book with it. Which I might do, in fact," he says, focused on his writing.

"Are you serious?"

He glances at me again. A smile sprouts on his lips.

"Yeah. Why not? It's business. Besides, I already have an audience for it."

"You're really serious, aren't you?"

“Of all people, I’m surprised you ask me that. You’ve made your money cashing on people’s curiosity. Sex is just another thing that sells. I didn’t invent this,” he says, his eyes slanting down to his screen.

Silence rolls over us.

“I can help you,” I say.

His hand shoots up, his eyes coming fast to me.

“Not gonna happen. You have your business, and I want mine.”

“I understand, but there’s no point in wasting time when you can skip a few steps.”

“No, no. It’s gonna be my thing and my mistakes, no matter how long it takes. You have to trust me.”

“It’s not that,” I murmur.

He waves me off, his eyes rooting on his laptop.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says curtly, a wall coming promptly between us.

I pull my mouth shut and sink back into the pillows.

# S ENNA

THE WIND BLOWS snow at the windows and the woods, covering them in white glitter while the fire roars in the background, consuming the logs and turning them into ashes, filling the air with the scent of earth and smoke.

Naked, we lie on the bed, facing each other. Eyes locked and our heads resting on our folded arms.

His fingers trail my face, his gaze connected to my eyes.

“How were you before?” he asks.

I give him a soft smile.

“I don’t think you would’ve liked me back then. I was different. Pure and innocent, I liked different things. I loved stories, mysteries, and magic. I believed in romantic love and finding that perfect man who makes you feel complete.”

I chuckle.

“I didn’t call them men back then. They were boys. Same thing. I couldn’t get close to them anyway. My mom was against relationships with random boys. We, the girls, attended a private school and we were confined to our quarters and closely supervised. Living at home with our parents wasn’t much different than spending time in that school. The boys our age didn’t have access to us. She never admitted to it, but she

resented the idea of us mingling with people not vetted by her. She was also a proponent of celibacy until marriage.”

I go quiet, suddenly annoyed.

“So, yeah... That’s how I grew up. As beautiful as our life looked from the outside, we’d been brought up in a very strict environment. It didn’t affect my sisters that much, but it broke me. I guess there’s always that risk, but my mother didn’t care. She was betting on the fact that sooner or later, I’d get with the program. Well, I didn’t, and her attempts to make me more like my sisters fueled my resentment against her. Also, against my dad, who was quietly enabling her. The rift between us was bound to happen, but I didn’t think it would unfold like it did.”

I pause again, getting lost in his eyes.

He studies my expression, a thought flitting through his eyes before he pulls his gaze away.

“What about your first man?” he asks.

I sense a shred of tension in his voice.

“It was, um... I don’t think I was ever... sexually innocent,” I say in a shaky tone.

He glances at me.

“Was he your first man?”

My heart starts slamming against my chest wall.

Oh, how I feared this moment. I had the truth locked in a drawer of my memory for so many years, and now it’s coming back to life.

A shadow slides over his face.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” he says, thrown off by my reaction.

I roll away from him.

He grabs my arm and pulls me back to him. I don’t fight him, but I look away to hide my eyes.

He clasps my chin and tips my face back to him.

“Look at me.”

I do, fighting my tears back and trying to suppress my panic— although the panic never goes away.

It's always there, burning through my body, feeding on my blood, and filling my head with dread.

“Whatever happened back then, it wasn't your fault...” he says.

But that's because he doesn't know.

I slowly nod.

“Oh, yes, it was...” I quietly say.

His grip softens.

He pulls away slightly and looks at me, baffled.

I keep nodding.

“Yes. It fucking was. Everything was my fault. Something was not right with me from the beginning, and he unleashed that thing.”

His eyes widen with surprise.

“I should've known,” I mutter. “And I should've stayed away from him. I knew who he was... Perhaps because he always had an eye on me. And I always had an eye on him. Besides, I caught him fucking other women around the house... And not only once.”

I search his eyes, expecting a reaction. Not much reads on his face.

“Yes. I got what I deserved... I should've left him alone, but no, no. I went to him. More than once,” I mutter, letting out a sarcastic chuckle. “And guess what. I liked it,” I say, all the bitterness seeping into my voice.

Taking me by surprise, he tears away from me and rolls off the bed. He scoops up his clothes from the chair and pulls his jeans and T-shirt on.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere,” he says in an icy voice.

I'm suddenly cold, as if a blizzard spins in the middle of the room. He sinks into an armchair next to the fireplace.

"I'm listening," he says deadpan.

His eyes go vacant, rooted to the trembling flames.

I slip off the bed and throw on some clothes.

"Does it make a difference to you?" I ask, nervous, as I sit in a chair next to him.

Frosted eyes turn to me.

He gives me a cold-hearted smirk that spreads pain down my spine.

He clicks his tongue carelessly.

"What happened that night was between you and that man. It makes no difference to me. But lying about it makes a difference."

My heart stops.

"I didn't lie."

His eyes shoot at me.

"Oh, yes. You fucking did. You lied to me... Perhaps to yourself as well. You led me to believe it was something else, and I hated him for what he did to you, but now it turns out it wasn't what I thought."

"I didn't lie."

"You didn't tell me the whole story. That's a fucking lie."

I take a long breath.

He shoots his eyes at me.

"You said you couldn't stop him. And now you say you actually pursued him. Why did you go to him?"

"To confront him."

He huffs and shakes his head in disbelief, fingers running through his hair.

“I can’t fucking believe this...” he says, leaning back in his chair.

His eyes go empty, stripped of any shred of empathy or warmth. It’s hard to believe this is the same man who held me in his arms moments ago.

“Why did you actually go to him?” he asks, dark and suspicious.

I lower my eyes, the silence stretching between us.

“Were you attracted to him?”

I finally bring my gaze to him. His eyes grill me, filled with questions.

“I think I was...”

He lifts an eyebrow.

“You think?” he sneers.

“I was. I had never been with a boy, let alone a man before him. I was untouched. Not even a kiss. I was stupid. Curious. That night, we were the only two people in the house. Half of the staff was on vacation, and the rest of them were in their quarters...” I say in one breath.

“Go on,” he says.

I slide my eyes to the flames.

“My sisters were supposed to come back from a trip. They were on their way home, but they had to stop at a hotel because of the weather. It was bad outside. I didn’t think much of anything that evening. We dined together before he left for his room. Minutes later, I followed him. Don’t ask me why. I’ve asked myself that very question so many times. I couldn’t find an answer. As I said before, a lot of it was sheer curiosity. Perhaps it was something else as well. Deep down in my heart, I knew it was against the rules to be alone with him in the same room. That’s what stirred up the rebel in me. I was not supposed to be anywhere close to a man, let alone him, and I saw an opportunity to misbehave. So, I took the stairs, and moments later, I knocked on his door. He wasn’t surprised when he saw me, as if he was expecting me. In the beginning,



we talked about books and paintings. He told me stories from when he was a teenager. I listened to him, entranced. To this day, I have no idea how much time we spent talking. And then he came closer to me, brought his hand to my face, and ran his fingers over my lips. The lines began to blur that very moment, and that's how everything got started."

I sense his stare on my face, but I can't make myself meet his eyes.

I keep talking.

"That night, he touched me for the first time. He knew why I was there. And when he laid his hands on me, my body was already his."

Tense, Jaden shifts in his chair.

"He didn't waste any time. Why would he?" I continue, smiling bitterly. "His hand traveled from my face to my neck and then to my shoulder, his fingers no longer touching the fabric of my dress but running straight onto my skin. My eyes couldn't pull away from his as I was flooded with a mysterious sensation for the first time in my life. So powerful and sinful. So irresistible that I was shackled to his touch. Heat exploded in my blood. And all I did, was watch him change my life, witnessing my own surrender. He slipped his hand over my breast. I felt a pulse between my legs. He held my eyes and cupped that breast, and pleasure stormed my insides. I couldn't move. I barely breathed. He cupped the other breast and skillfully pushed my dress down. The fabric fell to the floor, leaving me almost naked. His gaze ran slowly over my body, his lips curving into a knowing smile as he noticed my beaded nipples and arousal-soaked panties. One hand followed the trail of his gaze, his index finger tracing down to my lower stomach until it reached the edge of my panties. All that time, my eyes stayed glued on him, my heart beating madly. He glanced at me once, briefly taking in my parted lips and registering my clipped breaths and eyes reflecting pleasure and panic. He ignored my angst and focused on the pleasure, knowing full well that it was the way to get to me. It took one soft touch of his finger, tracing my slit through the fabric of my panties, and my fate was sealed... That small gesture

shaped my life for years to come. What I felt at that moment was something I had never experienced before. He took his time, indulging in my pleasure. His finger was joined by a second one. Not only that he brushed my folds but dipped his fingers into my softness, pressing gently on my clit. I didn't pull back. I only looked at him, unable to react. He felt compelled to continue, so he curled his arm around my waist and pulled me closer. His manly scent drugged me. Still, I didn't put up a fight. Grinning, he slid his palm down my stomach, spurring pleasure in his wake, and then he slipped his hand beneath the fabric, pushing the panties lower to my hips. There was nothing between us to prevent his touch. A cloud of tension started swirling around us. I stood there, frozen, as he ran his fingers over my flesh. Once. Twice. Many times. I could tell how wet I was from the way his fingers slipped. Turning to stone, I couldn't say a word while fire moved through my veins. He gently grabbed my mound, and I could've easily come in his hand. And then he asked me if I liked it. I didn't say a word. I couldn't. He brought his free hand to my chest, cupped a breast, and kneaded it while he kept playing with my clit. I didn't know much about men then, but one thing was clear to me. He was way beyond aroused. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, his breathing getting progressively heavy. He was getting tense as I was slowly falling into his trap. His whole stance clued me in. I could see his erection bulging against the expensive fabric of his pants. He caught the direction of my gaze and peeled his hand from my chest to palm his cock. To give me an idea... of what he had for me. He asked me to touch him. I didn't. I was too scared. He didn't mind it, or perhaps he did, but he didn't complain. My panties were still hanging low, crumpled between my thighs as he stroked my clit, smoothly moving his fingers lower. I closed my eyes. Even now, I remember that sensation as if I relive it. As if it flares through my senses. It was way more than I could resist. 'It feels good, doesn't it?' he asked. I didn't answer. His finger was slowly probing my entrance, his thumb sliding up and down my clit. My flesh was melting at that point. I think he knew. That's why he didn't really need my answer. He slowly pushed his finger inside me. A storm of tingles swirled between my thighs, building tension

in my belly, fueling my need for more. I think I licked my lips. His touch became stronger, more demanding, accompanied by a quiet growl. He pulled his zipper down, and then, instead of his fingers, I felt a different touch trailing my clit. It was something hard and warm and throbbing. Something wet at the tip. I flicked my eyes open and met his stare. He waited. I knew it was wrong, and yet I couldn't help it. He wrapped his hand around my neck and brought me close to him to feel his breath on my lips while he rubbed my clit with his erection. The heat coming from his shaft threw me into a pool of pleasure. He finally took my hand and guided it to his cock. Reluctantly, I curled my fingers around it. It didn't spoil his pleasure. He moved my hand with his, and soon I started stroking him on my own. For a moment, I was stunned by his expression. His eyes burned wild, his lips glistening, bloody red, crushed beneath his teeth. He looked at me as if he could barely hold himself back from fucking me. That was not far from the truth. Smoothly, he pushed me against the closest wall. Not even when he pressed my back against that wall did I fully understand what was happening. He rolled my panties down and slid his hand between my thighs. At that point, I was so turned on that all I wanted was to grind against his fingers. He must've known. He grabbed my sex, slid his fingers to my entrance, and eagerly pushed them into me, and that's when my blood exploded. The pain I felt couldn't curtail the pleasure. His breaths sped up, and so did mine. And then, in a final moment of lucidity, I realized what he was doing. His hard cock was trailing my sex, getting closer to my entrance. That was my moment of clarity when it dawned on me how wrong it was. It was also the moment to stop everything. I tried. I pushed him back. He didn't budge. I told him I was a virgin. He laughed and looked at me incredulously. He said it was hard to believe since I got so turned on by his touch. The more we argued, the more I panicked. I fought him, and then he crashed with me against that wall, stopping me from leaving. The more we wrestled, the more turned on we got. I wanted to scream, yet he cupped my mouth, wrapped me in his arm, and twirled me away from that wall, crashing with me on a couch. I was nothing for a muscular man like him who was already on top of me. His fly was already open, and his

erection was jutting in the air, heavy with blood. He speared through me in one long, hard motion that left me breathless and made me only see the light for a moment. He buried me in his arms and ran his cock into me again, tearing through me, opening me for him and life, not caring that he left a scar on me or my heart.”

I pause, catching up my breath.

“That was my first experience,” I say softly. “It was nothing but lust, confusion, and guilt. I regretted every moment of it. And also felt guilty for all the pleasure that I felt. That night changed my life. From that point on, I knew I couldn’t be romanced. I couldn’t taste something else or someone who would handle me differently. I couldn’t offer romance either. I couldn’t grasp how normal people fell in love. Up to this day, I still don’t. So, anyway... He fucked me that night. He didn’t kiss me, show me tenderness, or try to talk me into it. He just fucked me until, despite all the pain and guilt, I came hard. And I did more than once. Despite hating him because he forced my hand.”

I stop and shift my eyes to the window, his gaze moving over my face.

“I was a mess when I left his room. No words were spoken between us. No questions were asked. There was no understanding. And there I was. Confined to jail. Sentenced to permanent silence. What happened that night became my deepest secret. My family came back the next day. No one suspected anything. I did my best to act normally, and so did he. I avoided them as much as I could, and him in particular. I lived in hiding for the next few days, blaming it on a sudden sickness. And then, as things started to settle down, I ran into him again. It was a Saturday evening, and most of my family was invited to a party. Isabel, my little sister, and I were the only ones at home. And staff members, of course. Isabel was sleeping in her room. He came home earlier than everybody else, planning on seeing me again. That second time, there was no introduction. He grabbed me, nudged me into the guest house, locked the door, and fucked me. I could tell something had been stirred inside him. Something that couldn’t let him

forget me. It fed his hunger for me. As soon as he locked that door and had me for himself, my clothes were torn open under his fingers. He was far from gentle. And I didn't protest. He also knew I liked it. There was no kiss, romance, or sweet-talking of any kind. He grabbed me by the hair, spun me against a wall, arched my body, and rooted himself deep in me. The moment I started to whimper, he covered my mouth with his hand and increased the force and pace of his pounding. All I felt was intense pleasure and unstoppable arousal. I started to hate myself. From that day on, I had to live with that big rift inside me. Suddenly, there were two people inside me. One blaming the other. One suffering because of the other. The evil side of me was bullying the good side of me into submission, and it was all because of that guilty pleasure I needed and couldn't say no to. It took a long time until I garnered enough power to tell them both to shut up. To push the innocent version of me out of my sight and to feed the beast in me without screwing anyone else's life. That's how I got broken. And that's why I never dated anyone. Or tell anyone else my story. For the longest time, I had a hard time accepting who I was, and it became my most guarded secret. Despite all that, I went back to him whenever I could. Or rather whenever it was possible. There were always people in the house— staff and guests. Even so, we'd find the opportunity. Whether it was the study room or the backyard. Whether it was early in the morning when everybody was asleep or late at night. Whether it was his room, the farthest corner of the backyard, or the darkest cranny in the house. We'd find the place. And he'd always made himself available. We didn't talk much about what was going on between us, and whenever we found ourselves at a family function, we'd keep our distance, offering no clues to the others. Outside his room, I was nothing but a shy, soft-spoken girl, delicate and feminine, but I knew it was a lie. My mom started to introduce me to the young men who had been purposely brought to our house to meet me. I was nineteen and the next in line to find a suitor. I refused to meet with them, and everybody blamed it on my shyness. It went on like that for a few more weeks. I started college, but I was still living at home. The sex got dirtier and dirtier, and my guilt grew exponentially. I realized

there was no way to end it other than to do something dramatic. And that's exactly what I did. In the end, I told my mom about him, me, and the women I had caught him with. She didn't believe a thing. She told Evelyne, my older sister, and they laughed at me. They thought it was an invention, a way to get back at him and screw with his life. Some sort of jealousy they couldn't squarely explain. I couldn't argue with them. When confronted, he negated everything, of course. They didn't doubt him. Not even for a second. In all fairness, everything they saw from the exterior supported his words and their beliefs, dismissing my accusations. He and I rarely spoke to each other. They had no reason to believe me. So after I confessed, my family quickly found an explanation. They thought I was nothing but a sick liar craving some sort of twisted attention, dragging innocent people into my salacious stories. They eventually started to despise me, and that was the end of it. So, I left."

A long breath escapes my lips.

Relief is all I feel.

"That's the truth," I murmur.

He tears his gaze away from me, slowly shaking his head.

"Why couldn't you tell this story from the beginning?"

I shrug.

"I didn't think it would make a difference to you."

He huffs.

"You didn't think?"

He shoots his hand up, disappointment flashing through his gaze.

"You wanted me to feel bad about you. And I did. I don't regret it. But you also played on my feelings and used this story to nudge me in the right direction."

We lock eyes.

"That's not..." I say, quickly running out of words.

It only takes him a couple of seconds to register my hesitation. He leaps out of the chair and dashes out of the door.

I push to my feet.

“Jaden?”

By the time I make it to the living room, I stare at an empty space.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I shout, unsure if he’s still in the house.

The sound of a slammed door bounces against the walls. And soon after, the noise of a car engine drifting away rings in my ears.

I slip into a pair of boots and storm out the door.

I jog down the stairs, barely avoiding a fall, and dart in front of the SUV. He slams the brakes, narrowly avoiding me.

The headlights blind me.

Snow comes down steadily, gusts of arctic wind slicing through my thin top. I curl my hands into fists and slam the hood with all my power.

“Stop the fucking car!”

The engine keeps running.

Shielding my eyes against the lights, I shout.

“I didn’t lie to you, Jaden... I couldn’t tell you because I couldn’t even admit it to myself... You’re the first and only person who knows the whole truth.”

My voice starts breaking, and tears fall down my cheeks.

The engine dies out.

The car door cracks open.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

My hands slide onto the hood as I bend over the metal, crushed.

“Yes, I wanted you to fall for me... I did. Because I fell for you. I wouldn’t fool you into loving me,” I say, sobbing.

Slowly, I slide off the car and into the snow-covered ground, my body numb with pain and deadly cold.



# JADEN

I WRAP my arms around her and lift her up.

Her hands fall lifeless on my chest as I rush up the stairs, kick the door open, and make a beeline for the bathroom.

Icicles sparkle in her hair.

“I’m so sorry,” she mumbles as I put her down.

I peel my jacket off and start undressing her. Shivers run through her, her lips turning quickly blue.

I peel the cold, wet top off and unbuckle her belt. She curls her hands around my shoulders and leans on me as I pull off her jeans. Her skin is pale and blue, her nipples puckered, and her skin is covered with goosebumps. I nudge her to the tub and help her immerse in hot water.

A hint of color kisses her face.

“Is it better?”

Her eyes gain clarity, her face relaxing.

“Yes, it is,” she says softly.

“You’re like a kid,” I mutter.

“And you’re good with kids...” she says, a sad smile rolling to her lips.

“Not when they are grown-up women.”

She tips her chin down, hiding her eyes. I sit on the edge of the tub and gently tilt her face back up.

Her eyes glisten with tears.

“What was that?” I ask.

She shrugs and briefly looks away.

I wait.

“I can’t change the past,” she says, her gaze slanting down.

“Are you telling me this?”

She raises her eyes.

“I told you it wasn’t about the past. Of all people, do you think I’m the one to pass judgment?”

Her shoulders tilt up.

“I don’t know...” she mutters.

“You know it’s not about that. I never said it was a good story. It clearly wasn’t. I just don’t want you to use it to play me. It does me more harm than good. I can’t stand lies or twisted truths. Not when it comes from people I care for. All right?”

She blinks a couple of times, disconnected from my words, her eyes dull and empty.

I slide my hand to her shoulder and gently brush her skin.

“I’ll get you something warm.”

Half an hour later, wrapped in a soft robe, fingers curled around a cup of tea, she lies on the bed and observes me from above the rim.

Sunk into a chair next to the fireplace, laptop propped on my lap, I pretend I don’t register her stare.

A few moments of silence slip by.

“You’re gonna leave me, aren’t you?”

Her voice rings calm, even, and resolute, as if she's given some thought to that idea.

I cut my eyes at her.

“What makes you say that?” I ask, trying to remain composed while my pulse races.

“Because I learned you. You're always one foot in and one foot out. Always ready to pick up and leave.”

“It doesn't have anything to do with you.”

She places the cup on the nightstand.

“I think it does. That's why you overreacted when you heard the story.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Yes, you did.”

I shoot my hand up.

“Okay... You're free to believe whatever you want.”

“You didn't answer my question,” she says.

“I said... it doesn't have anything to do—”

“That's a yes,” she says, cutting me off.

I raise my eyes but stay quiet.

A frown creases her brow.

She crosses her arms over her chest and purses her lips.

“Everything you said to me makes sense. I can't dismiss any of that. But there is something else,” she says and pauses for a second. “I wouldn't give a shit if you left me because you didn't like me, but I'd be mad as hell if you abandoned me because you did,” she says.

I lower my eyes.

“It wouldn't make sense, would it?” I mutter, glancing at the screen.

“In your world, it would.”

Slowly, I close the laptop and set it on the side.

“No one knows the future, Senna. You and me, the least of all people.”

She shoots me a glare and leaps off the bed, within seconds darting across the room and vanishing out of the door.

“Senna?”

I push off the chair. A door slams in the background as I turn onto the corridor.

“Senna!”

My voice thunders across the hallway. I try a couple of doors. The rooms are empty. I finally reach the last one. The door is locked. I pound on it with my fist.

“Open the fucking door.”

“Go the fuck away.”

“Why do you always have to change your mind?” I shout.

A few moments of silence follow before the door swings open, hitting the wall with a bang. Her eyes could kill me. The robe is loose around her body, sliding open even more as she clasps her hands on her hips.

My eyes dip only for a moment. Her sleepy tits peek through her robe, looking in a better mood than her.

“How did I change my mind, Jaden? Huh? Explain to me. I’m dying to hear it. How did I fucking change my mind?”

I purse my lips, barely crushing a tell-all smile.

She slides her hands higher on her hips, revealing more of her naked body. I lose my focus for a moment.

“You wanted something from me...” I say, serious this time. “And you got it,” I mutter, my eyes locked with hers. “And now you want something else. Which doesn’t surprise me. It’s happened before. Women acting bravely. Going in for sex. Five fucks later, they want to plan a wedding.”

Three things happen next. Almost simultaneously.

Her eyes throw a big sword of anger through me as her arm swings in my direction—her hand missing me by a hair’s

breadth, and the door shuts in my face with a loud noise.

Just as fast, I push the door open before she has the chance to lock it. She sprints away from me, turns left, sneaks into the walk-in closet, and tries to shove that door in my face too.

I lunge at her and loop my arms around her waist, her fists flying to my chest. I grab her hair and lock her tighter. Her teeth sink into my shoulder. Peeling my arms away from her, I set her free, yet she has nowhere to go.

My back guards the door.

She takes a step back, breathing shallowly. Her hair is a complete mess, and her eyes burn holes into my skin.

“I’m not just any woman, Jaden. I’m not planning a wedding.”

“Then why the hell do you act like one?”

Her eyebrows pinch into a frown, and then her lips purse and crease, trembling with fury. She shoots her eyes to the side, grabs the first box she can get her hands on, and throws it at me.

The box meets my arm, and I try to protect myself, shoving it to the side. She looks at another one, the moment of distraction long enough for me to close the distance between us and wrap my arm around her. She fights me. I slide my fingers into her hair and crash with her into the wall. I pin her with my body, my fist closing in her hair.

“Let me go...” she growls.

“I’m not gonna let you go, and you fucking know it. I’ve warned you many times, and you still can’t understand, right? Do you really want to know how it feels to be mine? I’ll fucking show you.”

She tilts her head to bite me, and I pull back and bite her neck. She moans and whimpers. And then she softens a bit, her breaths coming hot as if she’s running a fever.

“Let me fucking go!” she snarls and starts kicking me.

I push her back against the wall and cuff her wrists in one hand, lifting them above her head. I slam my body against hers, her heated breaths steaming the air.

She pushes against me with all her force.

“Don’t you ever fucking lie to me again,” I growl and pull her hair, wiping the softness from her face.

Her eyes glint angrily.

“You fucking crossed the line, Jaden,” she hisses, her eyes blazing.

“Did I?” I toss at her before I lower my mouth to her neck and sink my teeth into her flesh again.

“Argh!”

I pull her hair again, angling her face up, her lips to my lips.

I roll my hips and shove my thigh between her legs. A long crying moan lifts off her lips. Her eyes blaze at me, her lips quivering with fury, yet her body starts to move against mine. I roll my hips again, and she grinds harder.

Running my palm down on her, I open her robe completely, and then I trail her sex and slide a couple of fingers into her. Her flesh throbs against my touch, slick and wet from her arousal.

I’m hard and twitching— so stirred up—fighting to stifle my impulse to kneel and lick that dripping wetness from her pussy.

I pull my fingers out.

She curses.

“That’s my girl. You’re gonna worship my fucking dick when I’m done with you,” I grunt.

She spits at me and fights me again. Wild and dark, she growls. I curl my fingers around her neck and hold her still. And then I brush her lips with mine.

“You said you love me... You have no fucking idea what you got yourself into. It will hurt your last fucking bone in your body when I rip your heart apart,” I say through clenched teeth.

She stops cold, the light fading in her eyes.

I bring my fingers to her lips. Her nostrils flare, the tip of her tongue flicking out. I slide them into her mouth.

A dark smile forms around them.

“You like it, huh? I love your fucking taste too...” I pull the fingers out of her mouth and lick them.

She jerks her head, trying to capture them again.

Lips parted and chest heaving, she looks at me, completely out. Crazy, she rolls her hips, rubbing my cock.

In one move, I crash my lips onto hers and thrust my tongue into her mouth. A moan vibrates in her throat. We lock and kiss, her mouth wet, so ready for my cock.

Breaking the kiss abruptly, I take a step back. Running both hands through my hair, I tick my chin, motioning to her.

“Get down.”

Panting, she stares at me, her eyes burning like embers. She drops to her knees. I edge to her and brace my hands against the wall.

“Take ‘em down.”

Her eyes shoot up at me, her lips trembling. She looks at me, frozen.

“Do you want to be mine?”

She stays silent. I slide my fist into her hair and jerk her. She sears me with her glare.

I smirk.

“Oh. You don’t like it? What did you expect, Senna? You wanted me domesticated? Huh? Is that what it was?”

She stays quiet.

“Answer me!”

Startled, she moves her lips.

“No.”

“Then don’t you fucking pout. Do you want us to fuck hard? We do. Do you want us to be more? You’ll have to wait. We both want it, but right now, it’s not possible. Do you think I ask too much of you, and you want to pull back? That’s fine by me, too,” I say. “Just make up your fucking mind.”

Silence falls over the racks of clothing.

I peel my hand off her, ready to step back.

“I don’t want to pull back,” she tosses at me faster than I expected.

“Good. Then let’s lay down some rules,” I say. “If there’s anything I need to know, open your mouth now and spit it out before you suck my dick.”

She looks at me, puzzled.

No muscle shifts on my face.

“Yes? No?”

“There’s nothing else.”

“Good. Now let’s put our little truce to the test,” I say, slightly tilting my head back.

Eyes trained on her, I unbuckle my belt and pull the zipper down. Rolling my hand over my shaft, I motion to her.

“Take your robe off,”

She lets it slide off her shoulders as I reach the back of my neck and tear my T-shirt off.

Palming my cock with one hand, I weave the other into her hair and tug at it, hard. A glint of pain flashes through her eyes.

Her head goes back with my hand, her delicate neck arching, beautifully exposed.



I can almost see the pulse throbbing beneath her silken skin.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

She tips her head down.

“You want more?”

She nods a yes.

“Take my dick out.”

Without delay, she brings her hands to my fly, frees my cock, and runs her hands on me.

“Stop.”

She freezes, her hand cuffed around my girth, her fingers touching my balls.

I pull her head back, forcing her to look up. She shoots her eyes at me, filled with surprise at first, then swimming with lust.

“Do you feel me?”

My veins explode with heat and blood beneath her touch, my pulse throbbing in her hand.

She nods. Her lips pull apart. Her nipples hardening.

“Spread your legs. I want to see you.”

She slowly parts her thighs, her folds sliding open, revealing her swollen, slick flesh. She does a little roll with her hips.

I stifle a smile.

“Now open your mouth.”

She parts her lips and looks up, completely in my control.

“Take your hands off me.”

She peels her fingers off my shaft.

My cock rips into the air.

I spread my legs slightly. Pulling her hair, I bring her mouth to my dick.

She slides her hands down her thighs.

“No touching, Senna.”

She sets her hands on her knees.

“Perfect,” I mutter, narrowing my eyes, and giving her the ghost of a smile. “Follow my hand.”

Fist in her hair, I guide her head to my throbbing cock.

“No sucking, baby. Just lips and tongue.”

She blinks in response, her mouth already filled with my hard meat. Eyes locked with hers, I loop my fingers around the root of my erection and move her head toward me.

Slowly.

Her hot breath hits my flesh first, and then the softness of her lips before she starts caressing me with her tongue.

I pull her hair down, prompting her to move her head back until my cock slides completely out of her mouth and curves up, throbbing with pleasure.

I bring it back to her lips and trace the seam of her mouth with the tip of my hard flesh. Her eyes gleam with pleasure while her long hair frames her beautiful face with a curtain of darkness, her nostrils flaring and her lips moving with hunger.

The pulse vibrating through my length feeds the tension in my groin.

A bead of pre-cum forms.

“Now, lick it.”

Her hands glide up my thighs, her eyes staying glued to mine. I slowly scrape my bottom lip with my teeth. She looks at me, waiting for directions.

I lift my chin up. A slow, small motion.

“Do it.”

She swirls her tongue around my crown, trailing every bit of flesh.

“Good.”

She removes the bead of pre-cum with her tongue and licks her lips.

“Do it again.”

This time she lowers her head, sets the tip of her tongue on my balls, and drags her warm, moist flesh against mine until she reaches the tip of my hot shaft.

Every second she spends in contact with me sends a firestorm through my blood. I'm hard as steel, her touch reverberating through my bones.

“Open wide.”

She does as told.

I bring her head to my groin, my hard dick entering her mouth. Her eyelids slide down slowly as I gently thrust. She watches me with hooded eyes as I drive my cock into her mouth.

Filled with me, she takes a breath.

Her cheeks turn red, her swollen lips curling around my hardness. She looks at me with soft eyes and moves her tongue as I guide her head.

“You can do it now.”

Pleasure rolls over her face as she starts to suck on me. She closes her eyes briefly, her nostrils flaring with delight.

“You can use your hands.”

Relief sets on her face.

Smoothly, she palms my balls and cuffs my cock, her hands working in tandem with her mouth. She gives me long laps and swirls her tongue around my shaft, her lips closing around the crown.

Eyes half closed, I move my hips. Hot, soft, and wet, her mouth blows me at a perfect pace.

I steal a glance at her. She takes her time feeding her pleasure. A shudder falls through me as she locks my eyes.

I pull her up and turn her around. She opens her legs and places her hands on the wall while I curl my hand around her neck and slide my cock into her. Her moist flesh clenches around me.

She starts grinding against me.

“Stop,” I rasp.

She freezes.

We’re both edging. And both throbbing. Arching her back, she pushes her butt out. I move my hips. Her spine curves even more. I do it again. Her head tilts back against my shoulder.

I get a glimpse of her profile and her soft, curled lips as she quietly moans.

I roll my fingers over her clit. Her hips jolt against me, her voice modulating into a sensual groan. I thrust all the way. A few more moments... There’s all it takes, and her body stills and tenses, her core exploding.

“Jaden,” she growls, her nails scratching the walls as I pound her through her orgasm.



## SENNA

HIS PALM GOES DOWN my back, smoothly caressing my skin.

On all fours, my backside pushed up to him, I watch him in the wall mirror as he rocks his hips. Once. Twice. A hundred times.

Every time he enters me, my center vibrates with pleasure. I’m no longer living for the peaks. I’m on a permanent high, and he only needs to feed me from time to time.

Like now.

A smile tilts his lips as we lock eyes in the mirror.

“Please,” I murmur, teetering on that thin edge, ready to come.

The tension builds up, and my legs begin to shake. His fingers thread through my hair, and I tilt my head back, anticipating the pain. It doesn't come, to my surprise.

He holds my locks in his fist to see my face and fills me up over and over again with long, sensual moves.

My chest follows his cadence, falling and rising rapidly as I push back against his cock every time he slides into me.

A perfect, complete motion, in and out, making me gasp and moan every single time he does it.

He holds me there, not rushing to get me off.

I peel my hands off the mattress and push upright. Propped on my knees, I arch my spine and press the back of my head against his shoulder. He holds me in his arms, one snaking around my waist, the other draping over my chest.

Head tilted back, eyes almost closed, I watch him in the mirror, trailing my neck with his lips, his body moving rhythmically.

“Jaden...” I murmur as I slip into a trance with him.

I feel his soft, soothing lips and then the sharp edge of his teeth and the wetness of his tongue leaving trails of pleasure on my skin. The orgasm sneaks up on me when I expect it the least, giving me a mind-blowing high.

“Oh, fuck...” I mumble.

Shuddering, I reach back.

He doesn't stop as I barely scale down. Leaning against him, I trace the muscular ropes of his thighs.

His chest expands against my back, filled with a gulp of air.

I lift my arms and grab his neck. He leans in, his hard chest pressing into my back, his face touching mine. The scent and smoothness of his skin make me melt in his arms.

His lips graze the column of my neck again before he gently bites my flesh, and with a flick of his tongue, he soothes the sting.

He thrusts harder and stops, and my body vibrates like a violin.

“Don’t you fucking move,” he says in a rumbling, hoarse voice.

Anything could get me off now. Another thrust, another flick of his tongue, or a blow of air over my lips. A slight brush over my clit. A dirty word.

Anything.

His hand comes to my mouth and my tongue darts out and swirls, wet against his palm. He gives me his fingers, and I clamp my mouth on them.

“You need a dick in your mouth, baby,” he says, smiling at me.

His mouth starts loving my neck again, his teeth sinking into my skin as he sucks and marks my flesh. Rocking his hips, he rams into me.

It takes a couple of times before the tension breaks.

My body jerks, slamming against him. I’m pulsing and breaking. I’m shaking and gushing. He has one hand in my hair, the other over my mouth, the intense orgasm swirling between my legs, dragging me through a storm of pleasure.

His grip strengthens as he hammers me and shoots his load, hot cum dripping over me.

It takes moments of heavy breathing and gasping to regain control and calm down. Silence comes back into the room, along with the sound of the moaning wind and the whispers of the fire.

His palm slides down my back, a tender gesture followed by a gentle kiss on my shoulder. I reach back, running my fingers through the back of his hair. We’re still locked, and I’ve never felt him so close, yet something doesn’t feel right.

I glance in the mirror, trying to find his eyes, and I can't. He looks at my back and slowly runs his hand up my side. As if he wants to lock the memory of my skin into his touch.

He no longer feels warm. He no longer feels close to me.

He takes a step back, and I pull my legs together. Sore, still shaking. I turn to him. His naked body is on full display, his hand cupping his groin as he trains his eyes on me.

A different light shines through his gaze.

A different man looks at me.

I feel the chill going down my back, the blaring sound of a warning blasting in my head.

And then I hear his words.

“When we go back... I'll move out,” he says deadpan, his voice frosted like the night outside.

I blink a few times, unable to voice a thought. My legs start shaking, and my knees are about to give in.

I slide my hand over the mattress, trying to regain my balance. His eyes hold mine. And that's the scariest thing of all.

I see no hesitance. No second thoughts. It's hard to tell whether he planned it for a while or he just made up his mind.

It doesn't really matter.

“What about your work?” I ask in a shaky voice.

“I can do it until you find a replacement or not. It's up to you. I really don't care.”

We share a few moments of silence.

“Why Jaden?”

Without saying another word, he walks past me and vanishes into the bathroom.

END OF BOOK TWO



THANK you for reading WILD JADEN (Dark Heart Series 2).

The story continues with JADEN'S LOVE (Dark Heart Series 3).

I hope you've enjoyed this series so far.

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# JADEN'S LOVE

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DARK HEART SERIES BOOK THREE

# S ENNA

A YEAR Later

HOW MANY TIMES do I have to perish before I get to live again?

Absently, I glance out the window, skimming the gravel alleys and the fountain in the driveway creating walls of water in the bright light.

Several start-ups have headquarters in the building.

Technically, my firm is not one of them, but I love the vibe of the place and the people.

The area looks like a college campus with lush vegetation, blooming shrubs, and tall palmettos. The fountains are strategically placed, guarding beautiful alleys lined with wrought iron benches.

It's lunchtime, and the parking lot is almost empty, most of the employees taking a short drive to the restaurants around the corner.

A blue sky patrolled by fluffy clouds stretches above.

“You can take up knitting.”

Harper's voice rings behind me.

Slowly I uncross my arms and turn around to face her.

“What are you talking about?” I mutter, not in the best mood for her joke.

A couple of steps bring me back to my desk, where I sink into my chair. My eyes fall on the schedule.

Intrigued by her silence, I raise my eyes, smoothly running my gaze over her colorful outfit—an indigo dress paired with a canary scarf around her neck.

Smiling, she hands me a small box wrapped in glossy paper.

“What is this?”

“It came in earlier,” she says.

I tear off the paper, flip the lid off, and fumble through the contents. Balls of soft yarn roll over the floor.

I scoop out the note.

“I don’t do product reviews,” I say dryly. “Please mail it back.”

She takes the box, collects the yarn, puts the lid back on, and ambles across the hallway, heading to her desk.

My eyes go to the glass door.

“Where’s everybody?” I ask, scanning the main room.

She leans back in her chair and throws me a glance from across the corridor.

“Break room,” she says and motions to the back, where a group of men and women sit at a table and eat.

They laugh from time to time.

They’re all younger than Harper and me.

“Do you want something to eat?” she asks, walking back into my office.

She gets busy tidying up the coffee table in the corner before smoothly shifting her focus from there to the vase

sitting on my desk, and I get that feeling again that she's watching over me.

This past year has been one of the worst for me, personally.

Ironically, my business was, and still is, booming.

Part of the reason could be that I moved the business out of my home and started hiring people a couple of weeks after Jaden left.

It was something I never thought I'd do, and I never planned to become a brick-and-mortar business.

It wasn't something I envisioned for the future, and certainly not something that I liked. I resented the idea of managing employees, but Harper convinced me I wouldn't need to do that had I set up the firm properly.

She was right for the most part.

Even so, I rejected her idea in the beginning.

I thought I could handle everything myself, but after a few days of doing my old job again, I knew it was time.

My head was no longer there, and it started to have an impact on my work.

Once I moved out, I had to change the business model.

Expanding was never in my plan, but it became necessary, so I had to spend some time figuring things out. Since cash flow had never been a problem, there was minimal risk in making the transition.

In the end, setting up a proper shop turned out to be a great move. It changed my daily routine, my schedule, and in the end, my entire life. It kept my mind away from everything that had happened the weeks before.

There was no way I could pull him out of my head, but at least I was able to muffle the noise and the chatter, the incessant rumination.

I couldn't find the answers that I needed, so there was no point in wasting time thinking about it.

Changing my workplace and spending time in a different environment helped me a lot. There was a place where I needed to be and a growing business that required my attention.

Once I got out of my home, I spent time with people, and I no longer felt alone. My workdays became longer. Purposely, I always got home late. After work, I preferred to spend my time working out or in a bookstore, anything but going home.

I swing my gaze to the tablet while Harper starts inspecting the shelves.

My mind begins wandering away again.

He broke my heart when he pulled out of my life. I never thought it could hurt so much. The pain was so intense I felt sick for days and months.

He walked out of my life and never got in touch with me again.

Weeks later, well after I'd gotten settled in my new headquarters, I mustered the courage to go back to Jill's and start inquiring about him.

It wasn't something that I wanted to do. I fought myself with a vengeance, but in the end, I couldn't stop the nagging thoughts clashing in my head, so I had to go out there and try to find out something about him.

Anything.

Scott no longer worked there, and the new people had no idea what I was asking about.

After that first night, I stopped by several times. Always on the lookout, keeping my eyes and ears open. Scanning the place. Looking for clues.

The hookers and hustlers were no longer lining the sidewalk, and there were no familiar faces. No one I could ask about him.

I gave up on going to Jill's, eventually, but I couldn't forget about him.

He left the very same evening we came back from that trip.

He never said we'd keep in touch, and damn sure he never did, severing all ties with me.

Come to think of it, that was the hardest part—pulling him out of my life abruptly, without recourse—but in the end, I had to make peace with it as well.

He vanished without a trace.

His phone number was no longer in service. I drove past his house a few times. Always at night, hoping to see the lights on, or a car parked in the front, signaling that someone was still living there.

A 'For Sale' sign sat on the front lawn before it disappeared a couple of weeks later. And then the lights started to come on, but I knew it had nothing to do with him.

Months later, on a hot summer evening, I drove all the way to the coast. It took me about an hour to find Sara's old place. The house was sunk in darkness, although an SUV was parked in the driveway. It wasn't Sara's car.

The following afternoon, I made the trip back. I spent minutes in my car, in front of the house, debating whether to go ahead with my plan and inquire about her or not.

Eventually, I climbed out, crossed the street, and knocked on the door.

Two small children and a woman greeted me in the doorway. Polite and friendly, she listened to me and answered my questions. Unfortunately, she had no information regarding the people who had lived in that house before.

A couple of days later, I thought about contacting a guy I knew and trusted, a PI who had worked for me before. I called him several times, but I never let the call go through.

He could've helped me by providing the information that I needed, but my gut was telling me it was a bad idea, so I eventually dropped it.

Unfortunately, the online research brought up only a few bits of information, all leading to a dead-end.

His website was sold in a private auction weeks after he had left. His images and clips were stripped from the pages, the nature of the enterprise remaining the same but featuring different people. He sold his audience and cashed out decently for a few weeks' worth of work.

Not bad.

“What do you think I should wear tonight?”

Harper's voice jolts me back to reality.

“Huh? Tonight?” I mutter, my mind going completely blank.

“Adele's party.”

“Oh, um... yeah. Whatever you want. It's nothing formal, and there are only a handful of people.”

“Are there any single men coming?”

I smile.

That's Harper being Harper.

“Yes, of course, there are.”

Excited, she claps her hands. Another faint grin pushes to my lips.

Admittedly, she does her best to keep my mind distracted.

Glee flashes in her eyes.

“Maybe we'll have some fun.”

“Yeah, and maybe you can find a man to put the rumors to rest.

“It's not my fault,” she says softly.

“I didn't say it was. It's just that people have restless minds.”

“You can find a man as well.”

“Not gonna happen.”

It hasn't happened in, um... What? A year?

As if he put a spell on me.



“No, baby. It’s up to you. The rumors got started because of you. You can change all that,” I say jokingly.

Seriously now, maybe she’ll hook up with someone and crush the swirl of rumors.

None of us have dated in months. Different reasons. I’ve never really tried. She has, but it has never worked out.

We got closer after Jaden left. Or I should say, she got worried sick because of me, and she did her best to mother me and bring me back to life.

She still doesn’t know much about my life, yet she is one of the closest people to me right now, if not the only one.

The rumors started because of something silly— as they always do. We went clubbing one night, trying to have some fun.

After several men hit on us, we decided to leave.

Instead of using the main exit like the rest of the patrons, we ended up in the back alley, laughing our asses off, our arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders, making all kinds of dirty jokes.

Someone spotted us leaving together, snickering and barely keeping our bodies straight, and that’s what prompted a story about us being more than co-workers and friends.

The tale made the rounds, and people smiled every time they saw us going out together.

Frankly, it didn’t bother me as much as it bothered her.

That’s not to say we are not joined at the hip.

We spend time at work and go out to eat, and then there are Adele’s parties, which Harper always drags me to. Just another trick to keep me out of my head.

“Do you want us to drive separately?” she asks.

Preoccupied with a random thought, I shift a blank gaze to her. Cocking her head to the side, she smiles, waiting.

My eyes quickly regain their focus.

I shake my head.

“No, no. I’ll pick you up.”

# S ENNA

WE ARRIVE at Adele's around eight o'clock. Her place is filled with guests, and it takes us a few good minutes to make the trip from the main door to the living room.

Wearing a fitted dress with metallic accents and her hair smoothed into a straight, silky veil, Harper turns a few heads.

Once we make it to the middle of the room, she turns her back to the crowd and gives me a knowing smile.

"I already love this party," she says, motioning discreetly to a group of men. "And I like your dress," she adds quickly, keenly studying my fashion pick— a skintight, black dress with long sleeves and a metallic zipper down my back, stopping short of my derriere.

"It fits you well," she murmurs just as one of the women at her side accidentally bumps into her and almost makes her crash into me.

"Maybe we should start to mingle..." I say, grabbing her elbow and dragging her to the side.

When she joins a group of people, I make a beeline for the kitchen. Adele curls her arms around my shoulders as soon as I enter the spacious room.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she says, her eyes gleaming brightly with a smile.

“Do you need any help?” I ask, eyeing the platters on the kitchen island.

“No, no. Everything is fine. Mark will take them to the guests.”

She pulls me to the side while her husband and a friend pick up the plates from the counter.

“Just to warn you, Evelyne is coming tonight,” she says under her breath, her eyes swinging quickly to the door as the men walk out carrying the food. “In fact, she should be here any moment now,” she adds, nervously checking her bejeweled watch.

My knees begin to soften.

“Why? Why is she coming here?” I ask, struggling to find my voice.

“She flew in for a business event.”

“What event?”

“I don’t know. A black-tie event at the Chamber of Commerce. She’s a speaker.”

“Oh.”

Shit.

I know what event she is talking about.

I received the invitation as well.

It’s an annual premier business gathering, and I intend to attend.

It makes good sense.

A few CEOs and business owners have been inducted into the Business Hall of Fame, and quite a few start-ups have been included in the Fast Track Development Program.

I don’t qualify for either, but it doesn’t hurt to show up.

“Are you okay?”

Adele's voice travels over the tall glasses she sets on the table.

"Yeah... Yeah. I am."

"How are things with you?"

"Good," I mutter absently.

"And the new business location?"

I raise my eyes.

"I can't complain."

"It's better, I imagine," she says, folding napkins. "I know you and I are different, but it would kill me if I didn't have a place to go to every day and interact with people."

"Yeah, yeah... It's better," I say, not sounding very convinced.

"I'm sure one of these days you'll also find a man to fit your taste," she says, smiling warmly.

Dear Adele. She's still hoping.

Somehow, I manage to grin as well.

"I'm sure I will," I lie, my gaze flying low, drifting over her hands and napkins.

The doorbell chimes, sending a shockwave through my stomach and tightening my chest with apprehension.

We both whip our heads toward the door.

Mark cuts his way through a group of people and swings the door open. A woman's silhouette fills the doorway, and I know it's her before I see her.

She takes a step in and fully comes into view, looking sharp and put together, a fake smile lining her lips.

Cordially, Mark hugs her. My breath catches as she starts talking to someone standing behind her.

It can't be who I think it is.

Time stretches as I wait.

My sister turns around after a few more moments, the door closing behind her. Whoever she was talking to is now gone. A sigh falls from my lips as Adele swings by me, hurrying to meet her.

This is going to be awkward.

My breathing seems to settle, following a normal pace, when the door opens again. Tense, I watch a broad-shouldered man entering the small foyer.

Abel?

What is he doing here?

Breathlessly, I watch Mark tearing away from Adele and Evelyne and shifting to Abel. They shake hands and pat each other on their backs, exchanging a few words.

What the fuck? Do they know each other?

I don't understand.

Evelyne and Adele pull away from the two men.

It doesn't take me long to realize that Abel arriving almost at the same time as my sister is nothing more than a coincidence. The fact that he and Mark know each other is a completely different story and sends a shudder through my bones.

It can't fucking be.

Furtively, I look around, checking people's faces, searching for reactions, afraid that my secret is no longer a secret and my messed up history is no longer buried but broadcasted in the room's hubbub.

Nobody gives a damn, but that doesn't stop my thoughts from spinning in my head.

I haven't seen Abel in, um, I don't know... A year?

My mind turns silent as Evelyne and Adele enter the kitchen.

"Here you are," Evelyne says.

Surprisingly, she opens her arms to hug me. I look at her suspiciously.

A smile stretches across her lips, prompting me to also fake excitement. I slip into her embrace, her fingers brushing my skin, cold as icicles.

She pulls back a little in a staged move and gives me a thorough once-over. I look at her in silence. She's either that good of an actress or this is nothing but a setup.

Another grin lights up her face, making her blue eyes pop. Swept back, her platinum blonde hair gives her a demure look.

It takes a few seconds before her expression changes, and a critical gaze falls over me, her eyes glinting with an amused grin.

"You're never gonna change, Senna," she says, condescending.

"Nice to see you too. How are you?" I toss at her, the irony lost on her.

She dismisses me with a flick of her hand and smoothly shifts her gaze away, focusing on the hors-d'oeuvre platter on the counter.

"I'm famished," she chirps preciously. "We spent hours on the tarmac. And I couldn't eat on the plane anyway."

She slips a tiny canapé into her mouth and chews delicately.

"How is your business?" she manages to ask between morsels of food.

"It's okay," I say without elaborating.

"What about your boyfriend?"

Her side-eyed glance finds me unprepared. I sense my lips quivering and my cheeks burning.

I quickly recollect myself and give her a cold gaze.

"What boyfriend?"

"The man you had with you at Isabel's party."

She narrows her eyes, and I expect a wink. It never comes.

“Is he old news already?” she asks maliciously.

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

Careful not to smudge her lipstick, she makes a perfect O with her lips and holds her fingers in front of her mouth.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Have I used the wrong word?” she asks, pretending she doesn’t understand the meaning of my words. “Is he your partner?”

“He’s not my partner,” I say curtly, the anger in my voice prompting Adele to shift her eyes to me.

“What is he then?” she asks, a wicked smile flickering across her face.

“He, um... was working for me.”

“In what capacity?” she asks before gulping another canapé.

Unlike her, she licks her fingers.

It’s time to pour myself a drink. I push myself out of my chair, turn my back to them and fumble through a couple of cabinets until I find a bottle of wine and glasses.

“You want some?” I ask as she carefully slides the edge of a napkin over the corner of her mouth and brushes off a crumb of pastry.

“No, thank you.”

I turn my back to her again, concentrating on the glass.

“He helped me with my writing.”

“Did he?” she sneers.

I spin around to face her, my eyes throwing daggers over the rim of my glass.

She barely suppresses a chuckle.

“Hmm... Oh, yes. I remember. He was a writer.”

She places a tiny Japanese roll in her mouth.



“He’s an extremely handsome man for a writer,” she says, chewing on her food.

My eyebrows go up.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I wait for her to finish chewing and swallowing and even getting a sip of water before she finally speaks again.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Adele watches us, her arms folded over her chest.

“He made quite a splash with my friends last year in the Keys. After all this time, they’re still talking about him.”

She smiles. My hand is itching to wipe that grin off her face.

“That’s why I was wondering about your relationship with him,” she murmurs casually.

“There was no relationship between us.”

My voice rolls out tense.

“That’s good to know,” she says, tossing her napkin on the table.

A sly smile drapes over her lips.

“Seemingly, he was bedding one of the guests that night.”

My glass slips through my fingers.

I manage to catch it, half of the wine spilling on the floor. I straighten my back immediately, doing my best to stifle my reaction.

“Are you okay?” Evelyne asks.

Briefly, I lock eyes with Adele, who throws me a worried look.

“Yes,” I say and smile.

To prove my point, I take a swig of wine.

“You were saying...?” I mutter.

“One of my friends caught him leaving a bungalow other than yours in the middle of the night.”

A black hole forms in my chest, sucking in my heart. I crush a gasp between my lips, trying to ignore the angry voice in my head.

Does it even matter?

My skin gets cold, and my teeth are about to chatter.

To aggravate me even more, the voice of reason barks in my head.

‘I told you so.’

I stiffen. I can say Evelyne’s words don’t mean a thing, but the truth is, he was gone that night, and I had to wait for him, tied to the bed, until he returned.

My lips crease into a sad smile.

Fucking liar. He’s nothing but a fucking liar. He’s no better than me.

He would’ve left me anyway.

“Good for him, I guess,” I say, detached.

My reaction throws her off, turning her smile into a ghost.

“Anyway, it’s not my business,” I add in a rush, motioning to the living room.

“If you’ll excuse me... I need to talk to my friend.”

I bring an empty gaze to Evelyne, who observes me in silence.

“I guess we’ll see each other again,” I say.

Her eyebrows lift with a questioning look.

“Adele told me you are a speaker at the Chamber of Commerce event,” I say.

“Oh, yes. Are you coming?” she asks, pleasantly surprised.

For the first time this evening, her expression strikes me as genuine.

“Yes.”

Smiling, I grab the wine bottle and my glass and spin away from her.

# S ENNA

THE CROWD THINS out around midnight, and the few people left are either engaged in a political debate in the living room or tasting desserts in the kitchen.

Abel has been discreet the entire evening, the few polite exchanges of words serving no clues to others on the nature of our connection.

It turns out he knows Mark from work. I was never curious enough to ask him about his line of work, and tonight was not the best moment to start that conversation.

I introduced him to Harper before I started mingling with the crowd and tried to stay away from Evelyne. And my whole past, to be honest.

I can't point out the exact number of drinks I had to ingest to make this work. All I know is one of them—the last one most likely—did the trick, and I no longer care about the people, my past life, or Jaden. A giggle forms in my throat as I finally see the funny part of it.

Amused, I set the empty bottle on the table, spin around and head to the bathroom. I lose my balance for a moment and struggle to regain control. The walls seem to cave in, and the whole room begins to spin.

I'll survive.

Just put one step in front of the other, Senna. You've done it before. You can do it again.

Grinning, I take a few more steps, my eyes trained on the bathroom door, when a hand slides over my butt.

Oh, I know this touch. I know it so well.

Soft tingles roll down my legs. Mmm... It doesn't feel bad at all. It's been some time since I felt that.

"You haven't called me in a while," Abel says, his husky voice flowing through me.

I shift my eyes to him and lose my balance again, this time clutching his arms and crashing with him against a wall not far from the elusive bathroom door.

"What happened to you, baby?" he asks.

His fingers gently clasp my chin, his eyes looking for mine. I find myself studying him despite my brain fog.

He's such a handsome man.

A thought springs into my head, yet I have a hard time voicing it. I part my lips and try to speak, the alcohol blocking my pipes.

His sexy grin doesn't help, distracting me even more.

My eyes dip to his full lips, then sweep the strong edge of his teeth and the shadow of his stubble.

"I meant to..." I say quietly, but that's a lie.

I never thought things would work out between the two of us again. That's why I'd chickened out, but now I wonder.

Could we make it work again?

Maybe?

I cast a glance over his body. The sharp, button-down shirt fits smoothly across his torso, the bottom neatly tucked inside his suit pants.

His hands slip to either side of my head, his palms bracing the wall, as his lips stop inches away from mine.

He would never kiss me. Not for a starter. But now, he might. His lips press against mine before I spin another thought.

Mmm.

He tastes good— a mix of scotch and cologne.

I bring my hands to his neck and pull him into me. He crashes into my frame, his warmth melting my skin. His lips burn. My blood simmers.

Without giving it much thought, I let my hands travel down his back and cup his hard butt.

His lips part, his tongue moving with mine.

I really don't need much teasing. My fingers trail around his hips and find his fly. I run my palm down before cupping his bulge.

"You make me so hot for you," he breathes into me, his hard-on stirring in my hand.

Then panic sweeps through me.

Fuck. Someone could walk in on us.

I tear my lips away from his.

"I can't do this here, Abel."

"I didn't ask you to," he says, his eyes glinting with a smile, the flame inside our bodies suggesting otherwise.

I slide my hand over his chest, following the smooth lines of his muscles, brushing his hardness at the same time.

"I still have it for you, Senna baby."

I open my mouth to say something, but the words never come. He curls his hand around my neck and pulls me to his lips again. His free hand comes on top of mine, his cock twitching against our touch. Mouths locked, we slipped into the bathroom, our senses swept by fire.

He slides his tongue between my lips, and I slip my fingers down his pants, eager to touch the smooth skin of his shaft.

My palm trails down, cupping his balls.

Tingles swirl between my legs, the tension rising fast. He slips his hands under my dress and smoothly rolls it to my waist.

This is insane, I muse while sucking on his tongue and moaning in his mouth. He pulls the fabric to the side and runs his fingers over my clit.

“Damn it, Abel,” I say, sweating.

He lifts my thigh and smoothly thrusts his fingers into me.

I bite his shoulder, my core clenching around his touch, my lipstick leaving smudges on his shirt.

“Fuck me...” he rumbles. “What the hell happened to you, baby?”

I wish I could give him an answer, but this is not the moment to confess. I’m too dazed to think about it, and too focused on the pleasure he’s been giving me.

His fingers go in and out, his hot breaths charring my skin.

“Come on, baby,” he murmurs against my lips as he feels my wetness pouring and my clenching.

He breathes faster and faster, his hard cock rubbing against my hand.

It all becomes a blur while tasting that pleasure, and in that fog, I hear a noise as the bathroom door slides open, and a silhouette fills my sight.

Harper’s lips part in surprise, or rather, shock, as her gaze dips briefly.

We don’t stop. We can’t.

A moment later, she slams the door shut, leaving us alone.

“That was awkward,” he says, his eyes unfocused, his balls already drawing tight.

He slips his arms under my thighs, lifts me up, and wraps my legs around his waist.

“Which way do you want it?” he asks.

I smile, amused, the effect of the alcohol finally waning.

Good habits die hard. He's still following our script.

"Any way you like it."

"Do you mind watching?"

"Not at all," I say.

He bends me over the sink, my reflection smiling at me. My eyes go to his face. Eyes swimming with lust, he can't keep his gaze off my butt. He lifts my dress over my rear, pulls my panties down, and finally lifts his gaze.

Our eyes meet in the mirror as he pulls his hard cock out and gives it a smooth tug.

"Don't start teasing me now, Abel."

He rolls a condom down.

"No teasing, baby," he says, giving me a grin.

"Just do it hard..." I say and feel him sliding into me. "The way I want it... Argh!"

My voice bounces against the walls.

He pulls back and roots himself in me again, granting my wish, and filling me to the brim.

My cock sabbatical is finally coming to an end.

Like right now.

Fuck you, Jaden.

With this last thought, I let myself be absorbed by the man behind me.

Observing me through his lashes, he yanks his shirt open.

Silky, dark hair shadows his chest.

He likes my eyes on him, his hardness pulsing in my core.

I smile and bite my lip.

He grins as well.

Hovering over me, he peels my dress off my shoulders and scoops my breasts out before giving them a good kneading.



I curve my back and push against him, the pleasure spinning harder inside me.

A moment later, he straightens his back, looks down, and grabs my ass while plunging into me.

“I fucking missed you,” he says, thrusting hard.

Our eyes lock in the mirror again, and I see it in his gaze. He’s always had more for me than a throbbing cock.

Pleasure rolls through me in waves, followed quickly by regret. I close my eyes and try to push them to the side. This is not the time for it.

His grip hardens as he plunges into me.

“I’m there...” I mumble in a shaky voice.

My moans are louder and louder before his hand slides over my mouth.

“Not here, baby,” he says softly, picking up the pace.

He holds onto me while I come and keeps pounding me until he shudders.

A muffled dialogue travels down the hallway, shifting closer. We hear the knock on the door just when his fingers dig into my flesh, and the climax shakes its way through his body.

Chest heaving, he pulls out of me.

He disposes of the condom, pulls his zipper up, and buttons up his shirt.

A second rap echoes outside.

“Just a moment,” he says, his voice even and low.

My eyes move to him while he motions to me.

“Time to go, baby.”

I straighten, my legs still wobbly.

“Can you walk?” he mouths to me.

I nod, and then I pull my panties up. He tugs my hemline down. I shimmy my way back into my dress and glance in the mirror, running trembling hands over my skirt.

He opens the door.

A woman stares at us suspiciously.

“My friend doesn’t feel well,” Abel says to her, flashing a charming grin.

The woman’s eyes go back and forth between us.

“I understand...” she says, not believing an iota.

She steps aside and lets us walk past her before she vanishes into the bathroom. Hurriedly, we veer toward the exit.

The moment we step out of the house, he whispers in my ear.

“I want more,” he says.

“Me too. Your car, my place...”

Just as I climb into his car, I spot Harper. She waves at me.

I grip his arm.

“Wait.”

For a moment, I search his eyes, pondering.

“Can we take her home?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says, a smile gliding to his lips.

I turn my head to Harper, who’s still waiting, and beckon her to us.



A MUFFLED alarm pulses in the background.

I lift my head and look around, faint light filtering through the shades. A groan crawls up my throat, the migraine killing me.

What day is today?

Little by little, reality fights its way back into my head. It’s Saturday.

Good.

Eyes closed, I sink back into the pillow, my head heavy as a shovel, my mouth dry like a heap of sand. I could easily drift off to sleep if it weren't for the headache hammering my head.

The sound of running water travels from the shower. I slide my eyes open again, prop myself on my elbows, and listen.

I shift my body, the silky sheet gliding off my chest.

The bed is empty on my side. More reality pours in, coming with a lot of flashbacks.

The bathroom.

Who is in the shower?

Abel?

Groaning, I roll off the bed and shuffle to the second bathroom. Running a shaky hand through my hair, I glance in the mirror.

I have to stop doing this. It makes me feel like crap. Mumbling a curse, I slip into the shower and let the water roll over me.

Mmm. That feels nice. The more water flows over me, the more clarity I get.

That's the problem with life's highs.

They make you forget for a moment, but there's a price to pay.

It's the morning after or the minute after.

It's the moment you get weaned off that thing.

It's pain coming back to you ten times stronger.

And it's the ugly truth. The crushing emptiness inside.

Is it worth it? I begin to wonder.

"Damn you, Jaden..." I murmur to myself, the words popping out of nowhere.

I turn the water off and wrap my chest in a towel. Barefoot, I saunter back into the bedroom. Shoulders propped against

the headboard, covered from the waist down, Abel raises his eyes from his phone.

“Hey, baby,” he says.

We briefly lock eyes before I shift my gaze away.

“You okay?” he asks.

I swing my eyes back to him.

Lifting an eyebrow, he shoots me a questioning look, hard, long muscles shifting smoothly beneath his skin as he changes his position.

My gaze moves over him.

A knowing smile creeps up his lips.

“Yeah... I am,” I say quietly.

He tilts his head back and narrows his eyes, that faint smile still brushing his lips.

“I gather you liked it.”

“Yes, I did.”

Turning my back to him, I hide my face and let the towel drop while reaching for my robe.

“You don’t need that,” he says softly.

I flick my eyes up and catch his gaze in the mirror. He runs it down my back, pursing his lips as he takes me in.

His eyes move back up.

“Come.”

He taps the spot next to him on the bed, motioning to me.

I smile.

A mischievous look slides over his face as he peels the sheet off, his hard cock pointed up.

A crooked grin creases his lips.

“I have something for you.”

“You sure do,” I say, smiling and giving him a side-eyed glance.

He beckons me to him.

“On me, baby,” he demands. “Turn around.”

He gently slaps my butt when I straddle his chest, my back to him, my eyes trained on the wall mirror.

He grabs my hips and pulls me to his face, his mouth sliding straight between my thighs, his tongue licking right between my legs.

Oh, my.

Just what the doctor ordered. That’s a nice way to start your day, I figure, smiling to myself.

It doesn’t take long before my breathing quickens, and I shudder with pleasure.

It’s perfect.

Dirty. Intimate. Familiar. No boundaries. No craziness. And no addiction.

No Jaden.

# S ENNA

“NICE SHACK,” Abel says as the server clears the table and smoothly pulls away. “Is this your typical Saturday brunch?” he asks, pointing to the floral centerpiece and the gourmet food tastefully arranged on the plates.

I shake my head.

“No. Not really. But I haven’t had company for a while, and I wanted to make this day special in every way,” I say and take a sip of coffee.

He leans back in his chair and laces his fingers behind his neck, stretching his bare torso.

“What happened to your man?”

I shoot my eyes at him.

“He wasn’t my man,” I say curtly, not even trying to conceal my frustration.

A soft smile curves his lips.

“Love hurts, huh?”

“Yeah... It does,” I murmur.

“I’m sorry,”

He straightens his back and brings his elbows to the table.

“We can talk if you want to,” he offers, and I suddenly feel bad for us.

“Isn’t this a bit odd?” I ask, trying to put a smile on my lips. “We just rolled off the bed, and now we’re talking about my love life.”

He gives me a faint smile.

“We don’t have to, but I’m good at this. I grew up with a younger sister, and I was the go-to person when she had questions about life. She always wanted to hear the other side’s opinion. Preferably a truthful one. She said it helped her a lot. I don’t know if I can be of any help to you, but I can try.”

A bright smile lights up his eyes, and a pang of jealousy seeps into my heart. Someday, some woman will get really lucky with this man if she’s smart enough.

“I don’t know...” I mutter hesitantly.

He shrugs.

“Fine by me.”

He picks up his cup of coffee and takes a sip.

“What happened to your little side business?” I ask.

He shakes his head and sets the cup on the table, his lips parting into a soft smile. I look at him, captivated.

“I’m not doing it any longer.”

“Why? It was good money.”

“It was, but money was never an issue for me. I was looking for something different.”

“And?”

“It wasn’t what I thought it would be.”

Lifting an eyebrow, I telegraph him a questioning look.

“It got boring after a while,” he says.

I quietly laugh.

“Shit... You could’ve told me then.”

He breathes out a chuckle.

“It had nothing to do with you. It was about the two other clients.”

“What about them?” I ask, picking up a slice of orange from the plate.

He watches me in silence as I squeeze the pulp between my teeth and lick a drop of juice from my lips. A fragrant aroma rolls over my taste buds.

His eyes flick up.

“They didn’t have much imagination, and it got boring fast.”

“What about me?”

“You were different. You knew exactly what you liked and enjoyed it as much as I did.”

“You mean the hard stuff?”

He nods.

“Mm-hmm. Other than a few exceptions, most men enjoy it if it pleases the women. You asked for it, and I was happy to provide it.”

“Hmm...” I murmur in a pensive mood.

I pause, staring blankly at a napkin.

“What?”

I glance up.

“Someone else told me the same thing.”

He smiles.

“Him?”

I tear my gaze away.

“Yes.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I’m not so sure it’s that good in the end,” I say, glancing away again.



We share a moment of silence.

“Do you think it had something to do with him leaving you?”

“How do you know he left me?”

He flashes a soft grin.

“It’s not that hard.”

“It was probably more than that,” I murmur.

“The way I see it, there’s no point in fighting your nature,” he says, no trace of a smile on his lips. “It doesn’t serve you well to pretend you’re someone you’re not. There aren’t many women like you, Senna. If a man can’t see you for who you are, don’t waste your time thinking about or missing him.”

He pauses again.

“I’m gonna be very frank with you here. Most men I know would rather roll in bed with the woman they love than do chores and domestic stuff around the house. Modern men have adapted to this ‘new’ reality, but some still want the real thing. A woman who can be the center of their existence. Men like to conquer but also like to be captivated by a woman they perceive as equal. Life vibrates through these men, but it’s not always easy to express that power when things tend to suppress their nature. They are not bad men. They are just men brimming with life, and if they’re lucky, they find the kind of woman they like. Women like them. Like you do. It doesn’t mean they never want to settle or father children or have a home. But when they do, it only adds to their life; it never subtracts. It’s not a trade-off for them or their women.”

His eyes dip to his hands, shadows flitting through his gaze.

“The point I’m trying to make here is that he had no problem with how you wanted him to fuck you. I’ve seen the guy. He could’ve fucked his way through half of the guests at your birthday party. Men and women. But he wanted you. Because he liked you. If anything, he might’ve liked you too much.”

My lips open in surprise.

“I’m not so sure about that. People don’t leave without an explanation when they like other people.”

“Regular people don’t, but he didn’t strike me as just another guy. When someone like him finds his match, it’s not a random occurrence. All that power he has means nothing if he loses himself in you. Something had prompted him to pull away from you. In time you’ll find out what his reasons were. Honestly, I don’t think you’ve seen the last of him.”



“YOU CAN LEAVE them on my desk.”

The messenger slides a box wrapped in black and white paper and embellished with a golden ribbon next to my phone.

I give it a double take.

“Harper?”

She sticks her head out of her office.

“Has anyone died?” I joke, my smile withering away as I get a glimpse of her face. “What happened?” I ask, concerned.

She looks as if she has spent the weekend crying. Dark circles stretch around her eyes, not a trace of makeup on her face. Her ponytail looks like a botched attempt to tame her hair.

She wears an ugly dress.

Lifting my finger, I motion to her.

“Can you come to my office for a moment?”

Reluctantly, she removes her earpiece, straightens her back, and walks across the hallway.

She looks frail and tired.

Holding her eyes and rolling a pen between my fingers, I tilt my chin toward the door.

“Close it, please.”

She slides it shut.

“Take a seat.”

She lowers herself to the edge of the chair.

“What the hell happened to you?” I ask, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the desk.

Her lips begin to quiver.

“I feel so bad about Adele’s party,” she says in a faint voice.

I look at her, confused.

“What are you talking about?”

She fidgets in her chair.

“I didn’t know you were in the bathroom with him.”

“Him?”

“Abel.”

My mouth drops open. I stay like that for a moment before I laugh.

“Is that why you are so upset?”

“Partly,” she says quietly.

“But why?”

“I don’t want things to get awkward between us and you to think about firing me.”

“Why would I fire you?” I ask.

She shrugs, the corners of her eyes slanting down as if she is about to cry.

“People are not comfortable in that kind of situation.”

I push back a chuckle.

“I looked pretty comfortable, didn’t I?”

She studies my face.

“I’ve never caught anyone before,” she says.

“I’ve never got caught before either,” I say, amused.

Her face brightens with a smile.

“You overthink everything, Harper,” I say, flipping the lid of a different box open and pointing to a bunch of cupcakes.

“Help yourself,” I say.

I scoop one out while she peers at them hesitantly.

“Try one. It will make you feel better.”

She opts for a chocolate cupcake with a mound of buttercream icing. One bite later, she smiles, the butter smearing her lips.

I hand her a napkin.

“About that evening. You were saying...?” I murmur.

She looks at me.

“It feels awkward.”

I place my cupcake on a paper plate, chew on the moist cake, and swallow a small bite.

I stare blankly for a moment.

She reminds me of the way I used to be. Always apologizing for everything.

“It feels awkward because that’s the way you feel. We’ll go on with our lives. It doesn’t mean anything. Not to Abel or me. Hopefully, not to you either.”

“Seriously?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Her face glows with a smile that gets quickly chased away by another thought.

“You like him?” she asks.

“Abel? Yes. I always did.”

I take another bite of cake.

She gives me a furtive glance.

“He’s a very handsome man,” she says.

“Yes, he is.”

She lowers her eyes, red up to her hairline.

“And well endowed,” she says under her breath.

I breathe out a chuckle.

“That too. There’s no way to deny that now.”

She flicks her eyes up.

“He’s a good man, too,” I say seriously, brushing crumbs off my fingers.

She stays silent.

“Is this the reason you are sad?” I ask.

“Maybe.”

Smiling, I push out of the chair and walk to the fridge.

“You want some?” I ask, pulling out a water bottle.

She nods.

I set a bottle for her on the desk and take a seat.

“You spent some time with him that evening. Do you like him?” I ask.

“Yes. I like him... A lot,” she adds, a bit embarrassed.

I examine her for a moment.

She avoids my eyes.

“Abel is a very good friend of mine, but he’s not my boyfriend.”

“He was friendly with me, and I think he liked me too,” she says timidly.

I weigh my words.

“If that’s the case, you should try to get to know him better. He can make you a very happy woman.”

She looks at me, intrigued.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t mind if I get to know him better?”

I pick up my cupcake again.

“Nope. I’m out of your way. If he likes you, don’t pass on that opportunity. He needs a woman who is a lot of fun and gives him her heart. I could never be that for him. If you do that, he’ll give you everything you need, and you won’t regret it.”

# S ENNA

THE GOWN FALLS LONGER than I thought, trailing on the floor.

It's a black sequined dress molded to my body, a long back zipper closing it tightly around my waist while a small train gives it a sexy look in the back. The event is formal, and by far, this is my best pick.

I will fit right in.

I hop on the heels and twirl. With heels, the hem fits just right, and the train no longer touches the floor.

I glance in the mirror one last time, inspecting my makeup and my hair before snatching the clutch and heading to the door.

A car picks me up in front of my house.

Forty minutes later, I sit at a table surrounded by guests in one of the most beautiful beach resorts.

The ballroom is royally lit.

I survey the room for a good fifteen minutes, looking for Evelyne, and I spot her just before she walks to the podium.

The lights turn low as the speakers line up behind her, waiting for their turn. Most of the people are already in, so I use the opportunity to sneak outside.

Fresh air fills my lungs as I step down the corridor.

Wide open, the doors let in the ocean breeze.

I run my gaze up and down the hallway.

There's no one here.

The few people who've skipped the ceremony are waiting for the party to start, seeking refuge on the patio.

Their meshed voices travel through the air, drawing my attention to the terrace.

Men and women enjoy the beautiful weather by the handrail and the beach.

I step out of the building and turn left, heading to a deserted corner.

The wind blows through my hair.

Absently, I comb it back, my eyes moving to the horizon, my mind wandering away.

The sun begins to descend toward the water, spreading a reddish glow over the ocean and the sand.

The scent of algae imbues the air, reminding me of the summer.

I should take some time off, relax and unwind for a while.

A short break wouldn't hurt.

Spending a week on the coast sounds good, and the more I think about it, the more I like the idea.

The voices turn into a muffled hum as I get swept away by the view. Seagulls chase each other on the beach, and waves crash gently against the shore.

I get lost in my surroundings, feeling at peace.

Minutes later, I refocus and spin around, sauntering back. I walk toward the entrance when a few men and women catch my eye, a splash of color grabbing my attention.

I glance to the side, my gaze getting snagged by a woman's fluid, red gown. The plunging neckline reveals her



back down to the dimples of her backside.

That very second, I register her spine's beautiful curvature, her smooth skin, and her hair tumbling down her back. I admire the cut of her dress and the flattering fit, the slinky fabric intimately outlining the swell of her butt.

A man's hand rests on the small of her back, expressive and noticeable like her body.

My eyes linger on the perfect French cuff and the expensive cufflinks peeking from under his suit jacket.

I roll my gaze over his hand, the long, sculpted fingers striking me as familiar.

My heart skips beats when I see his ring.

Slowly, I drag my gaze over his arm and shoulders and then to his hair. The mix of wheat blonde and sun-kissed strands makes my blood cold in my veins.

My mouth falls open in surprise.

It can't fucking be.

Someone in the group says something funny, and they all start laughing. I slow down a bit, keen to get a glimpse of his face and confirm my suspicion.

He whips his head to the side, half of his smile and profile entering my line of sight, bringing back a flashback of him.

I look at him, paralyzed.

One step away from the door, I freeze—my hands sweaty, my legs rooted to the ground. My soul leaves my body as I witness their collective glee and his irresistible charm captivating that woman.

As stunning as he was before, he was nothing as he is now.

A magnetism flows through him, gleaming in his eyes and pearly smile. He's no longer the hustler or the man living on the fringe.

Something happened to him.

He no longer has the feral glint in his gaze and restlessness.

He's self-assured and settled. Confident and powerful. He has the glow of money on his face and the arresting beauty stemming from that power.

He's no longer tormented, looking for a safe haven.

He's found his path.

My eyes go over his attire again, taking a swift inventory of his designer suit, shoes, and high-end watch.

Slowly, he strokes the woman's back.

My breath gets stuck in my throat as my anger flares. Her melodious laugh feels like a nail in my head, making my teeth grind.

Now is the moment to pull away from them, yet I can't.

My gaze sweeps the woman. She must be gorgeous if her front is half as beautiful as her back.

She slides her hand up his arm and rests her delicate fingers on his shoulder, her grip speaking of tenderness and a connection to him. She angles her face up while he looks down to capture her expression.

He looks ravishing. Relaxed, amused. The owner of a different life.

It's hard to find in him the man I used to know.

The wounded, broken man.

The man whose heart felt like a toxic desert. He seems content and whole. And now entranced by someone else.

She murmurs something to him, and he lowers his head so she can whisper in his ear. She brings her hands to his face and slowly trails his jawline.

His jawline.

My muscles tense beneath my skin. I could implode.

I take a small step toward the entrance, my gaze still pinned on them. A sharp pain rams through my chest as I see

his lips meeting her cheek.

Shaking inside, I move closer to the door.

And then, it happens.

That very last moment. Just before I could turn around and never see him again, he raises his eyes and locks my gaze.

A split second—not even that—yet, it’s more than enough.

Enough to feel his gaze flow through me. Enough to let him read my eyes. Enough to see the change in him.

I whip my gaze away, not fast enough to miss the storm brewing in his eyes as he grapples with recognition.

His smile vanishes from his lips, his charm destined for that woman gone.

His eyes turn cold and gray, and that’s when I dash inside.

Sounds travel through the air— his unmistakable voice, the woman’s giggle, and a few indistinguishable words spoken by his friends.

And then I hear his steps trailing me.

I lift the bottom of my dress and rush inside. The clicking-clanking of my shoes ripples through the air.

“Senna?”

The very sound of my name on his lips hurts me.

I’m almost running, yet his footsteps echo closer when I dash past the elevator and make a beeline for the stairs.

With one trembling hand, I hold my phone while I desperately sift through names, looking for my driver’s number.

The other clutches my purse.

Quivering and barely breathing, I make the call and briefly give him the instructions. The man is set to pick me up in less than twenty minutes, and it’s still not soon enough.

Fuck.

I reach the top of the stairs and swivel my head, searching for a place to hide, when his voice echoes behind me for the second time.

“Senna?”

I toss my phone into my clutch, slip the purse under my arm, grab the bottom of my skirt with both hands, and run up the next flight of stairs.

He picks up the pace.

The third level is completely empty. All doors are closed. There is no one up here. I scan the hallway, quickly running out of ideas. Panting, I dart to the restroom and jerk the door open.

I only meet silence.

I toss the clutch on the vanity top, prop my hands on the sink, and bend forward. I take a few long breaths, trying to calm my heart and make the wheezing cease.

The door bursts open with a loud bang when he steps in.



I SHOOT a side-eyed glance at his shoes.

“Get the fuck out,” I growl in a low, menacing voice.

He takes a step forward.

I straighten and face him, but I can’t focus on his features, and I can’t look into his eyes.

“Get the fuck out, Jaden,” I say, my teeth grinding.

He shoves his hands into his pockets.

“Let’s talk,” he says in a commanding voice.

My eyes rove over his features and his unbuttoned neckline.

I never thought it would hurt me so much to see his face again.

“I don’t want to talk, Jaden. There’s nothing to talk about, and I don’t need a slideshow to understand. One glimpse was enough. Now get the hell out.”

He takes another step closer.

I jerk out of my paralysis, and the first thing I lay my hands on—a bottle of soap—becomes airborne, heading in his direction.

He ducks out of the way of it, the soap splashing all over the wall. He shoots his hands up.

“We only talk, for fuck’s sake,” he barks, his eyes pulling into a tight line.

My eyes roam over him, floating over his shoulders as I fight the pain gripping my chest. I whip my gaze to the side, snatch my clutch and take a couple of steps back.

“I don’t need your fucking pep talk, Jaden,” I say, barely keeping my voice under control. “There’s nothing we can talk about. I know who you are. I see who you are. I understand who you’ve become. You’ve planned it all along, haven’t you? You knew what you were aiming for, and I was the perfect step for you on your way up. A means to an end.”

I pause and breathe out a sarcastic chuckle.

His eyes stay on me, unreadable.

“You had no problem using me. I bet you haven’t had the slightest remorse. The poor, rich girl can take another punch. She’s strong. She’s made it so far. She knows the game. The risks. If nothing else, she understands loss. She will be fine. I bet that’s what you thought. I was your way out, or should I say your way in. Some incidental collateral damage. Some chick you fucked for fun, who also served a purpose. So fucking what? Right?”

Blades of steel lash at me from between his lashes.

His hands are still tucked in his pockets, his broad chest not moving beneath his crisp, white shirt.

I wonder if he’s breathing.

“You have no fucking heart, Jaden,” I say in a different voice.

No longer angry and no longer fuming.

Just deeply hurt.

“I never thought... I never thought you were just another man walking the face of the earth, empty inside. Using, lying, and disposing of women. Seeing a woman as a shell. A body. A face without a soul or heart. A head without a loving thought. But that’s exactly what you saw in me when I was stupid enough to think I’d found my match. My mate. My lover. The man who could handle my chaos. The man who knew this journey’s pain, despair, and lack of fairness and felt the sting, ache, and heavy-handed wisdom of this life. I thought you were all that. But in the end, you were nothing like that. All those bad things that happened to you were not your teachers. Or your friends. They weren’t even your enemies. They were something you disposed of, the same way you’d toss an old ragged coat in the garbage or forget about a bad dream or reality you no longer have a use for. You did the same thing to me. In your opinion, that’s how life was supposed to be played out. Ultimately, it was all about what you could get, not what you could give, what you could keep, not what you had to offer. Yeah... That’s who you are. Just another man. But not my man.”

He opens his mouth to say something. I flick my hand up.

“Please. Don’t even bother. I know my words mean nothing to you. As much as I know, you didn’t spare a thought on me all this time. Not more than you’d spend on some piece of garbage you kicked out of your way. And how do I know? I just saw you. The real you. The new you. And your new toy. The woman who fulfills your needs. The woman who matches your suit and perfect smile. The woman who spreads her legs to receive your generosity. To enjoy your skills, your cock. The lies murmured in her ear. She doesn’t care. You are a shiny toy to her as much as she is to you. See, this is the world in which I’m doomed to live. For people like you and her, it doesn’t matter, while for me... Oh, for me...” I say, my voice almost breaking as a few tears fall from my lashes. “For me,

everything gets carved inside me, written with my fucking blood and tears. It's like a curse that follows me around. Every damn thing lodges in my memory to last a lifetime, threading through my days, nights, and even dreams, stirring up the fear that I can never push away. But I'm the stupid one, aren't I? The unadapted. The ignorant. The one who doesn't fit. The one who doesn't get it. The one who people laugh at. And why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't you? Everything is so easy for you and her and for your friends outside. Life is like a rollercoaster for you. One that is meant to be fun. For me, life is a fight in the trenches, made of sweat and tears. Made of loneliness and awkwardness. While people like you and her celebrate and party, twirling in the big dance of life, you think I'm the sour loser. So be it, Jaden. You fucked me over. And that's fine. You're not the first one and, surely, not the last. That's why I don't need to talk with you. I got it. So, go fuck your fucking girlfriend or wife or whoever the hell she is, and leave me alone.“

# S ENNA

HE SHIFTS HIS POSITION, and my eyes shoot fast at him. He takes another step in my direction.

“Stay where you are, Jaden. I don’t need you close to me,” I bark.

He freezes.

More tears pool in my eyes.

I slowly shake my head.

“I never thought that you’d hurt me so much. I never thought I’d let you inside me, and you’d take everything from me and leave me with nothing. Empty. Barren. I wanted you to fill me up with you. And you did. You showed me heaven and then dragged me straight into the darkest hell.”

“Senna...”

His voice is soft yet cold.

My finger shoots up in the air.

“Don’t you fucking talk to me. I don’t need to hear your explanation. You know who I am. You know me. You felt me. You can’t possibly say you didn’t know. I opened my heart to you and let you see everything inside me. The good and the bad. And you let me close to you as well. You wanted me to get used to you and trust you. And then you took everything



away from me. Why? And for what, Jaden? Was it for that?" I ask, my hand flicking toward the door. "It's that what you wanted. That woman?"

"No," he says curtly.

I look at him, washed with disbelief.

"Are you fucking kidding me? I just saw you. Both of you. You had no idea I was there. Your tenderness for her made me sick. I couldn't even recognize you for a moment. I couldn't possibly believe that you were the same man who opened his heart to me and held me in his arms, and made me feel something. Is she love for you, Jaden?"

He looks at me, stubbornly silent.

"Is she fucking love?" I shout.

My voice smashes into the walls.

"Answer me!"

"She's not love."

"Then what is she? Is she romance? Hot sex?"

He tilts his head down, his gaze trailing down the floor.

"Tell me. What is she to you? Is she the next stop?"

He pulls his eyes up, their sharpness feeling like a sword.

"None of that."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"She's not relevant."

My mouth falls open with surprise.

"Oh, she's not..."

I shake my head slowly, my eyes darting back and forth as I struggle to understand.

"Like me, Jaden? Is she unimportant like me? Is she? Do you tell your life story to these women, let them fall for you, only to dispose of them when they become irrelevant?"

"That's not it."

I study him.

Puzzled. Intrigued.

He looks like a stranger to me. A fine man, oozing sophistication, yet nonetheless a stranger.

“Hmm... It may not be it,” I mutter, “but the outcome is the same. You use your power to attract them and to fuck them. And then, you smash their hearts. At least that’s what you did to me. And you had absolutely no remorse. I thought that deep inside you lived a vibrant man, a warm heart with so much tenderness to give. I thought you could do so much better than some run-of-the-mill jerk. I’m sorry if you think I’m a loser, but that’s how I feel, and there’s nothing I can do to change that. That’s why I don’t want to hear you talking. The last thing I need from you is condescendence or a speech about moving on or staying friends. Words of wisdom about how this game needs to be played. It’s not a game if it hurts. At least to me, it isn’t.”

“It wasn’t a game,” he deadpans.

I look at him, baffled.

“How can you say that to me?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Is it? Then what was it, Jaden? A change of heart? A second thought?”

“No.”

I freeze for a moment.

“You can’t possibly say that to me.”

I pause and take a long breath, shaking my head.

“You know what?” I mutter. “I really don’t need to hear you. I’ve seen enough with my own eyes. Your words mean nothing to me.”

He pulls his hand out of his pocket and brings it inches from my shoulder.

I take a step back so he can’t touch me.

“I’m not joking, Jaden.”

“I’m not saying that you are,” he says seriously, “but I think you want to hear what I have to say. We wouldn’t be here if you weren’t at least curious.”

I throw him a venomous glare.

“Spare your breath. I’m not curious. I know exactly what happened. I had a suspicion then, and you confirmed it tonight. As I watched you give that woman your undivided attention, the pieces of the puzzle finally fell into place. That’s when it dawned on me. There’s a reason you are here at a business event, looking like a million bucks, with that beautiful woman draped over your arm. There’s a reason why you sold everything, took Sara and Emma with you, and vanished. I may be dumb when it comes to love, but not when it comes to money. I can tell you’ve come into your own money. The money that was never within your reach. Now you have it. Plenty of it. I can tell. You’ve sold some kind of business or maybe more. Other than that website. And that’s fine. Congrats. But you used me to get where you are and crushed my heart in the process. I would’ve helped you anyway, but you didn’t want it that way. Remember? I offered you my help. You said no. You wanted to do it on your own. But that was not all. You resented me for being in that position, for having the upper hand. It wasn’t my fault, Jaden. I told you so many times. I walked in your shoes. I knew how it was. But no, no. You wanted to prove it to yourself. And what did you prove, Jaden? Besides making money. What did you prove? That you can step on a woman’s heart without remorse? That a woman is easily replaceable? That we are all the same in the end? That it doesn’t matter? As long as she has a pretty face and a warm place between her legs, it’s all fair game? Was that it?”

A glint sparks in his eyes, clouding his gaze.

“Oh... It hurts? You think this hurts?” I ask, feeling the prickle of my tears. “You have no idea what pain is, Jaden. You’re not hurting, baby. You think you are because you got caught and don’t like it. That’s why. Truth be told, had I not walked in on you this evening, you’d be right there right now,

on that terrace, with her arm curled around your waist and her fragrance in your nostrils. With your lips on her hair and her face mesmerized as she drank you in. You'd flash your smile, and she'd get wet between her legs while you'd have her wrapped around your body like a vine. There wouldn't be the slightest thought or the faintest memory, let alone a flashback to tarnish your evening. Not the slightest shred of remorse. Because your past is dead and stashed away. With me in it. Am I right? I knew it all along. I saw it in your eyes. I knew it back then. You wanted to strike on your own, but to get to that point, you had to take advantage of me. Or the situation... Whatever. You could've done all that without messing with my head, but you did it anyway. Why? Because you fucking could. And why the fuck not? I was the one who volunteered. I begged for it. I bought your crap. I fell for you. Oh, you have no idea how I regret this evening and running into you like that. Had I known this would happen, I would've never shown up. I came to this stupid event not having the slightest idea that I'd find you here. Not knowing that fate would play a dirty trick on me."

"Things are not the way you think, Senna."

I jerk my hand dismissively.

"Please. That's exactly how they are," I say, running my fingers beneath my lashes, brushing off tears. "I trusted you. I was foolish enough to think we were alike. And we could help each other. Love each other. I was so stupid."

I breathe out a chuckle under his rueful eyes.

"And I still am. This never gets old. No matter how many times I crash and burn, I can never learn that just because I feel a certain way doesn't mean that other people feel the same. I keep forgetting how fickle people are. But here you are, a great teacher of life, reminding me. Nothing matters in this world. Nothing. A heart means nothing. Feelings mean nothing. Words have lost their meaning. They're now empty like seashells buried in the sand. It's all dust before it all turns to dust. I fell for everything you said. Your story. Your family. You."

Running a hand across my cheek, I trail my gaze down.

“I need you to leave now,” I say firmly without looking at him.

“Not before I get to talk.”

I raise cloudy eyes to him.

“It’s not your call, Jaden. There is nothing you can tell right now to change the way I feel. If anything, you can make things worse, so just fucking go. It’s better for both of us.”

His eyes glisten again, but there is no warmth in them. It’s hard to say whether there’s a shred of emotion left in him for me or not.

And frankly, I don’t care.

“I don’t want your words. We’re past that moment,” I say, calm and collected. “Good for you that you made a life for yourself and found a beautiful woman to warm up your bed, but I didn’t need to see all that with my own eyes. I don’t need to take that image to my empty home. And you don’t need to let her wait so you can catch up with some old flame you fucked on your way up.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw.

“Oh... I’m sorry. Did I hit a nerve? I’m sorry, baby, but see, you need to learn a thing or two from people you fucked over. Truth is always more painful than lies. That’s why people lie all the time. But you shouldn’t dislike the truth. It’s freeing. You told me that one time. Remember? It’s good for me too. It helps me to leave you and our little story behind me. I can finally close that chapter of my life and move on, as I’m sure you’d say. I’ll be honest with you. Tonight is going to be a miserable night. I might need to get a few drinks and pay someone to fuck me, so I forget that I met you, but tomorrow is a new day. A different day. And it will be a better day. Every day that follows will make me feel better and better. In time I’ll feel nothing for you, Jaden. I wasn’t good enough for you. I get it. But even so, you didn’t need to play with my heart. I didn’t do anything bad to you.”

Quietly, he fumbles inside his jacket, looking for a cigarette. He comes back with nothing.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” he says.

“Go fuck yourself. I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. Now get out of my way.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and doesn’t move.

“Whatever...” I mutter, collecting up my clutch, gathering the bottom of my skirt, and slipping by him.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he thunders.

I laugh without turning.

“Watch me,” I throw at him without stopping, my voice filled with icicles.

# S ENNA

HIS ARMS unfold quickly before locking around me and pinning me against the wall.

He clutches my shoulders, and I don't even fight him.

I only flash a cold, sarcastic smile.

"Really?" I murmur.

"You need to listen to me, Senna."

I throw him a defying look.

"Nope. I don't need to do a fucking thing. You lost that privilege when you walked out on me a year ago without the slightest explanation. Without a shred of care. Without a call or even an email. A text or a sign from you. You can't possibly think I'm interested in what you have to say after all this time. Had you had something to say to me, you would've called me way before this day. We wouldn't be stuck in this bathroom while a beautiful woman waits for you downstairs."

His eyes drill into mine, his jaw tightening while his lips start trembling with fury.

"You don't believe half of what you just said," he growls.

I laugh.

"Why wouldn't I?"

He shakes his head, making my blood boil.

“I left. I know it hurt you, and it was painful for me as well, but I had my reasons, and you were one of them.”

I breathe a careless chuckle.

He clips my chin and brings my eyes back to his.

“It’s the fucking truth. I didn’t choose it to be that way,” he says seriously.

“Nobody forced you to leave.”

“There was no place for me in your life.”

I look at him incredulously, my lips slowly curving into a smile.

“Fucking arrogant asshole. I never said that. You felt that way. I didn’t make you feel that way.”

“You didn’t need to. I’m not a boy, Senna. I know who I am, and I know what I want. And what I wanted back then was not within my reach.”

Fury flows through me.

I slap his chest forcefully.

“Get away from me.”

He takes a step back but not giving me enough room to leave.

“You did what you did for whatever reason, and now you’re feeding me a story that it’s supposed to make you look like a martyr while flattering me. You know me better than that. I don’t buy this bullshit. People do whatever the hell they want to, and no matter how nasty and hurtful it is to other people, they always find an explanation for their crap. It’s in their nature.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“Spare me, will you?”



I try to push him to the side and step away from him, and he jerks my shoulders back against the wall.

I find a wicked pleasure in seeing him tormented.

“This is obviously not working for you, baby,” I mutter, my voice lined with irony.

He curls his hand around my neck, with force this time, and I gasp.

“I don’t need your mockery,” he says. “I need you to listen to me.”

“Tough luck. That’s not gonna happen,” I say through clenched teeth.

His grip softens as he looks down and shakes his head, a sad grin lining his lips.

He raises his gaze to me again.

“You are so fucking stubborn.”

“You knew that.”

He slowly shakes his head, still smiling. That beautiful grin always warmed my heart.

“I didn’t know how deep your feelings ran,” he says in a softer voice. “I knew I’d hurt you but never thought I’d leave you scars.”

“Scars were not my problem. You warned me. Remember?”

His eyes glint with emotion this time.

“Yes, I do. But that was not my intention. The only reason I said that was to keep you away from me and protect you. And also myself. To keep things how they were and prevent them from changing us.”

“You’ve changed anyway.”

He looks at me, his gray eyes looking like a rainy day.

“No, I haven’t. A lot of things have changed, but not me. I’m not happier than I was with you. I’m not different than I was with you. I have the same scars and ink under this shirt. I

have the same coldness in my soul. I have the same loneliness I've always had. My life is so much better in so many many ways. But I'm the same. As hurtful as they were, all the things you said to me weren't true. I didn't use you. No matter how we ended it, it would've felt the same way. I wanted to be your man. Not the poor guy you found on the street, behind a club, or stabbed by a thug on a dirt road in the woods. At that point, I didn't know if I could be that man. The same way you didn't know whether you'd make it when you left home. Nobody knows those things. I didn't know them either. I took a chance, and luckily, it all worked out. But things could've been completely different."

I look at him, dumbstruck.

"And what exactly was your plan, Jaden? To go out there, strike on your own, and come back to me?"

He studies my eyes for a moment.

He shakes his head again.

"No. I knew it was difficult to come back. And I knew how you'd react. I see it now."

"Was it worth it?"

"No. It was a loss either way, but I had to take a chance."

"Well... You took it. And it paid off. Now that you made your money, you also got a prize," I sneer.

He sinks his eyes into mine, a grin tugging at his lips.

"Your words can't hurt me more than they already have," he says.

"I hurt you?? Seriously? No, no. That wasn't my intention. I was only stating a fact. So, who is she, by the way? Wife? Girlfriend? Hot date?"

"She's a client," he deadpans.

I look at him, thrown off.

"You're joking, right?"

He clicks his tongue.

“Nope. I’m not.”

I push his chest again. He doesn’t move.

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth.”

“You said you didn’t do women. Besides, the woman couldn’t be more smitten with you. She looked as if she was in love with you.”

“That’s my job,” he says, giving me a cocky grin.

My palm lands on his face, and the light shatters in his eyes.

I no longer smile. He doesn’t, either.

I can see the red traces of my fingers on his face.

“I need to go,” I say, sensing a wave of panic.

His grip hardens on my neck while his lips curl into a smirk.

He erases the last shred of space between us and leans to me, as close as he can get, his lips almost touching mine while he speaks with hardly restrained fury.

“I didn’t want things to be like this, Senna. I didn’t want to hurt you as much as I didn’t want to hurt myself. I didn’t leave you because I didn’t love you. If anything, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. And I bet you couldn’t stop thinking about me too. No matter how many people were between us and who I fucked, you were the only one for me. I bet it was the same for you.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

He huffs and lowers his eyes to my lips, his fingers squeezing my chin like iron pliers. His eyes lift and dive into mine, and I suddenly feel open for him to read.

“How many men have fucked you this past year?”

“That’s none of your fucking business,” I blurt.

“Well, it is now.”

“Don’t fool yourself. I don’t want you back in my life.”

He smiles and lets out that soft huff again.

“It’s not up to you, baby.”

“Damn sure it is. I’d rather jump off a cliff than let you touch me again.”

He laughs before it all subsides to a small smile, and he speaks quietly.

“Do you want to put it to the test?”

“I don’t need to.”

“Really?” he murmurs, his lips curving slightly, his thumb slowly tracing the column of my neck, his gaze drifting to my collarbones and chest, smoothly weighing the swell of my breasts before dipping lower to my thighs.

He snakes an arm around my waist and pulls me into him. My dress melts into my skin.

“How does it feel, baby?” he murmurs in my ear.

His voice gives me goosebumps.

“Like a job well done,” I say.

He grins again and lowers his mouth, his hot breath trailing down my neck. The pleasure ripples across my chest and down my body, igniting a storm between my legs.

“Tell me, Senna,” he says against my skin, making me shudder.

He straightens and looks at me.

“How many men fucked you?”

“I told you it’s none of your business, and whether there was one or many, it doesn’t make a fucking difference. I didn’t waste my time thinking about you.”

He laughs, sincerely amused.

“Was it good?”

“It was fantastic. The best fucking I have ever had.”

He may still grin, but I see the glint of pain in his eyes.

“I’m sure you’ve got a lot of pleasure, too,” I mutter.

“Pleasure. Yes. What I had with you? Nope.”

I bring my hand to his chest to push him away, but I can’t do it for some reason.

“It’s useless. We can’t bring those times back. And there is nothing I can feel for you. Not in my body. And damn sure not in my heart.”

“You wanna bet?”

I see the ghost of a smile in his gaze and his sheer determination.

“So what do you plan to do? Fuck me? I just told you it no longer works. I’m dead inside. That train has left the station. I’m rather warming up to my old fuck buddy who’s running a promotion right now and fucks me for free if that’s what you want to know since we’re back at sharing shit about our lives.”

His smile vanishes from his lips.

Finally.

I tilt my head back and laugh in his face.

“What? You thought I’d wait for you? You really thought I was that stupid?”

He looks at me with stormy eyes.

Before I draw another breath, a curse explodes on his lips, and he puts his fist into the wall.

I don’t flinch.

Unfazed, I push his chest away.

To my surprise, he takes a step back and runs his hands through his hair, a dark expression sliding over his face.

“I didn’t ask you to run after me, Jaden.”

I finally square my shoulders, lift my skirt and strut to the door.

His voice stops me in my tracks.

“I told you. You’re not going anywhere.”

I barely turn my head to glance at him when his hand lands on my shoulder, slips under the strap, and tugs.

A long, crying sound spears through the air as my gown splits across my back down to my rear.

He spins me before crashing me into the wall. My clutch lands on the floor.

I let out a cold chuckle.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I ask.

“What I’ve longed for since I left,” he growls in my ear, his voice so dark, it makes my hair bristle.

His jacket hits the floor. He parts my legs with his knee and runs his hand between my thighs before he rolls my panties down.

The air starts lapping at my flesh.

He lifts the bottom of my dress.

“Hold it,” he barks.

I grab the heap of fabric and slide my gaze to the side, watching him in the mirror. The sound of ripped foil rolls in my ears.

“I’m not a whore, Jaden.”

“I’m protecting you,” he says, pissed while working his fly open.

His hand goes down his curved erection, neatly rolling down the condom.

“Mmm... Was she worth it? To go bareback?”

“I didn’t go bareback. You fucking know me.”

“I thought I did.”

“Shut up, Senna,” he barks again.

His body comes to mine. Hot and hard, his dick pressing against me.

“You’re no better than me...” I say.

“I’ve never said that...” he rumbles, his hand fisting into my hair, his breath searing my neck.

Without another word, he eases himself in, my center quickly clenching in response. His hard meat stretches my walls.

“You’re gonna pay dearly for this,” I murmur.

“Shut up,” he says, giving me a slow, deep thrust.

The last atom of my body vibrates in response. Biting my lip, I suppress my reaction.

I’d rather die than show him how much I like it. He pulls back a little, my wetness trickling down.

He senses it.

“Is that how it feels when you don’t like it, baby?” he sneers.

“Fuck off.”

A hard thrust comes into my wetness.

“You’ve never been a good liar, Senna. And you insist on doing it.”

“Because you’ve given me no other choice.”

“It’s not always in my hands.”

“Whatever...”

He rams into me again.

I offer him nothing, keeping my hips still. And yet, I can’t stop clenching.

I hear his chuckle and get a glimpse of him looking down at my butt as he plunges into me. Every time he fills me up, I want to squeal. He senses my stare and shifts his eyes, catching me peeking at him.

His palm goes over my butt and then around, sliding between my thighs. His fingertips touch my clit, barely—he doesn’t even rub it—and I feel the echo in my abdomen.

I slightly arch before I freeze.

“You can’t deny it,” he murmurs, studying my reaction.

He rolls his hips over and over again.

“There’s nothing to deny,” I say in a strained voice, struggling to control myself.

It’s all in vain.

His dick slides into a pool of wetness, making me pulse at a frantic pace. He presses me with his body and rams into me.

He’s so deep inside me it hurts.

He stops moving for a second, tenderly strumming my clit, a wave of pleasure crashing through me.

My senses are open to him as I absorb him—the aroma of his cologne, the masculine scent of his arousal, the warmth of his arm locked around me, and the soft touch of his fingers on my clit.

He breathes faster now, all that warm air rolling into my hair and fanning over my neck, drowning me in pleasure.

“There’s no point in lying to me, Senna,” he murmurs, brushing my temple with his lips, whipping up a chemical storm in my body.

I push back a moan.

His thighs, chest, and groin press against me, and I relish them. Goosebumps flare on my skin as I register the soft wool of his pants, the cold touch of his belt, the starched fabric of his shirt, and the warmth and smoothness of his skin.

He almost slides his cock out, and I struggle to keep my hips from moving, my hands from grabbing him, and my crying moans from falling out.

He rocks his hips again, crashing into me.

I bite my lip again, still fighting.

He clutches my neck and grabs my mound as he delivers another hard thrust, and something breaks inside me.

There’s no pain.



Only pleasure.

Heat spikes through me, making me throb intensely.

My skin burns, and my fingers hurt while I desperately grip my dress.

I manage to stay silent. But there is nothing I can do about my sex.

Swollen and wet, my center squeezes his hard flesh, throbbing around him.

Pounding me, he lowers his mouth to my ear and moves his hand into my hair.

“That’s what I was talking about, baby. You can’t fight this, no matter how much you want to. You are mine, whether you hate or resent me, and I will drag you back no matter how difficult you make this to be.”

“Go to hell.”

His response comes swiftly in the form of a forceful thrust that pushes me into the wall and almost tears me apart inside.

His fist pulls my hair back, forcing me to arch my neck. His lips slide over my skin and then the sharp edge of his teeth.

“That’s what you hate about me. You got hooked on me a year ago, and I became your addiction. Your flesh doesn’t lie.”

I shift.

He blocks me with his torso while clicking his tongue.

“Nah-uh. You will go when I let you go.”

His breath is strained and heavy. He cups my breasts and rocks his hips harder and faster.

My back is glued to his chest, his arms locked around me.

I lean on him, panting, my heart racing like his. Whatever bad words we had between us, they’re long gone.

Silently, I let him enter me.

Regret may come to me later, but right now, I can't be bothered. I drink the pleasure to the last drop, getting drunk, confused, and torn.

He fucks me as if nothing happened between us.

As if there was no lapse of time. As if he didn't put his fist into my heart. As if a woman doesn't wait for him outside.

He fucks me wild and lifts me to another peak, and once I have it, then he comes, grunting and shuddering behind me.

Sadness comes to me as everything begins to settle. The high is gone, and the words are futile.

He pulls out of me, tosses the condom into the trash, and slides his back against the wall, still stroking his cock.

His chest still pumping extra air.

A fiery smile flickers across his lips as he observes me through his lashes.

“So much for someone dead inside...” he murmurs.

I let the gown fall, reach back to keep it together, and stick the purse under my arm.

“Fuck you, Jaden.”

Without another word, I slip out the door.

# S ENNA

I'M amazed I can still walk.

I'm surprised I can put one foot in front of the other and pull away from him.

I run a shaky hand through my hair while holding my dress with the other.

Dazed, I slide my gaze over the glass wall stretching to the left, checking my reflection.

I look like hell.

My phone vibrates with a message. I slant my eyes down. Shit. The car's been waiting for me for some time. I text my driver back and rush down the stairs just when the place begins to get animated. The doors to the event room are wide open, and people flood the first floor.

Taking a sharp left, I dash out of the building as quickly as possible. The last thing I want right now is to run into Evelyne.

Fresh air rolls over me as I walk outside. The evening has already set in, streetlights casting a soft glow over the sidewalk.

“Good evening, Miss.”

The driver holds the door open and softly nods as I slip inside.

He closes the door and hurries to his seat while I roll the window down. A soft breeze fans over my lips.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm down.

“Are we going home, Miss?” he asks, glancing in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, please.”

He starts the ignition and steers left, pulling away from the building when my gaze gets snagged by the beautiful woman Jaden has had slung over his arm.

It’s her dress that draws my attention again.

The fiery red gown with a revealing cleavage at the front.

As the car passes by, I get a glimpse of her face.

She’s as beautiful as I expected. Symmetrical features, big eyes, pouty lips. She’s about my age. Perhaps older.

She raises her eyes from her phone a couple of times and looks toward the entrance. Searching for him, I imagine. Her gaze shifts to the screen as she starts typing.

She leans against a high-end, silver sports car. His ride, most likely.

Numb, I turn my eyes away from her and pull my mind away from him, the building, this evening, and our past together.

Fuck him.

The car glides away, putting much-needed distance between us.

An hour later, I enter my home.

I turn a lamp on and walk across the lobby, floating like a ghost.

Struggling, I drag my feet up the stairs and to the bedroom, extra effort going into every step. I walk into the room, toss the clutch on the bed, and dash to the shower.

I take one step in and freeze in the middle of the bathroom, my eyes pinned on the mirror.

What happened to me?

I step toward the mirror and bring my hands to my face, studying myself, puzzled by my reflection.

A stranger gazes back at me.

Is this she?

My hair is a complete mess, my makeup is almost gone, my skin is pale, my lips are bloodless, and yet, my eyes... They tell a different story. My eyes have never burned like this—molten amber trimmed with raven lashes.

I lean forward as I inspect my face. There's something different about me. I tip my face to the side and run my gaze and fingers over my jawline.

My face looks leaner, my cheeks hollower... And my eyes even deeper. There's a softness buried in their whiskey color, reminding me of the past.

Oh, my God.

The woman looking back at me... She is the girl I used to be. My features are softer, and my lips curve into a different kind of smile. Warmer. Tender.

I run my fingers through my hair before tracing my cheeks.

It can't be.

Slowly, I slide my gown off and step out of my heels.

I glance in the mirror again. The curtain of dark hair splits over my shoulders, waves tumbling down, touching my nipples. I tilt my head and comb my hair to the side.

With tenderness, I touch my skin.

I can see the imprint of his teeth. The lines are red and swollen and sensitive to the touch.

Lower, I find a reddish patch of skin. Those were his lips.

My gaze slides even lower.

A few red lines on my breasts bring back the memory of him again. Despite the signs and marks—his branding—my body celebrates his touch.

“Jaden...” I murmur, baffled.

How is that possible? How can he do that?

I feel so good inside, yet I am so conflicted.

How can he possibly bring her back?

He’s not good news. He never was. And yet, a good feeling grows in me. I’m no longer empty inside.



“ARE YOU LEAVING EARLY?”

Harper pops into my office as she says those words.

Her face beams with a smile.

“No... Why? What’s going on?” I ask, giving her a quick once-over.

The blue cobalt dress features a stylish bateau neckline and a silver metallic belt.

“Are you going on a date or something?”

She stays quiet.

“Are you ?” I toss at her again.

Her cheeks turn crimson.

I push back in my chair, grinning.

“No... Don’t tell me,” I murmur.

She gets busy with the vase on my desk, messing with the fresh tulips.

Her eyes come to me.

Smiling like a fox, she gives me a soft nod.

“It’s the second date,” she says.

“Harper?”

“Yes.”

She seems a bit startled.

“You and Abel?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“How was it?”

Her eyes gleam with a smile.

“It’s even better than I thought.”

“I told you,” I say. “I’m so happy for you.”

Her eyebrows tilt up.

“Are you?” she asks incredulously.

“Yes, I am.”

“He’s a nice man,” she says.

“That’s why I’m so happy for both of you.”

She searches my eyes, grappling with disbelief.

“I truly am,” I say in a softer voice. “He was never my man. We met in special circumstances, and I couldn’t be the woman for him. We’re still good friends, but everything else is in the past now. He knows it, and you know it too. All you need to do is to be your usual sweet self with him, and everything else will take care of itself. Anyway...” I say in a different voice. “Why are you asking me if I’m leaving early?”

“It’s Tony’s birthday, and we want to order something special for lunch.”

“Perfect,” I say. “I’ll place the order.” I check the time on my phone. “I better do it now before they get swamped.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to,” I say.

I call an Italian restaurant close to us, and the food trays arrive at one o’clock.

Harper and one of the girls set up the conference room.

I watch them through the glass wall. Harper moves around, coordinating everyone.

I'm glad she's ditched her sad clothes, replacing them with stylish outfits.

Max and Tony, our two software engineers, walk into the office half an hour later. They sit around the table, and cheers drift through the air.

I push out of my chair, heading their way, when a messenger looms in the doorway.

I sign for a package, glancing briefly at it.

It's addressed to me personally, which is unusual since I almost never receive personal mail here.

It's a handwritten label, the return address unfamiliar to me. I've never heard of that company.

Without giving it a second thought, I toss the parcel on the desk and spin away. It's only after I take a couple of steps toward the door that I stop, spin around and dash to the table, nagged by a crazy thought.

I pick up the package and tear the lid open. There's a box inside bearing the name of a posh boutique, and I slash it open with a cutter and work my way through the swishy paper.

A long, black gown almost identical to the one I wore the other evening comes into view. I pull the dress up by the straps and let it unfold. It is sleeveless, backless, and beaded from top to bottom. I check the label. It's my size and the same designer. In fact, it's part of the same runway collection.

I fish out a small envelope and pull out a handwritten note.

I'M SORRY. Give me a chance to explain.

Jaden



I SUCK IN A SHARP BREATH, having a hard time suppressing the impulse to run the box cutter through the delicate chiffon.

I let the gown drop back into the box, slide the top back on, snatch the note, my car keys, and my phone, and storm out of the office.



I LOCATE the sender's address not far from us.

It's a new, modern building with five levels, blue glass walls, and steel frames. Several tech start-ups set up shop here.

It was one of the places I had on my list when I looked for space.

The price per square foot was attractive, and the amenities were par to none. I opted against it in the end, mainly because it's downtown and traffic is heavy.

It was a big step to move my business out of my house, and I didn't want to deal with the hustle and bustle of the city on top of that.

I check the address again before sliding my gaze to the rearview mirror, briefly examining my face.

Tense, I pull the car to a stop, turn off the engine, step out, and stride across the parking lot.

A woman greets me in the lobby. She points to the concierge desk, where I sign in, and then directs me to the top floor.

I ride the elevator, a ball of jitters.

Two men keep me company all the way to the last floor, their eyes dipping as I turn my back to them. The doors slide open as we reach our destination.

They let me walk out first.

A large space sprawls out in front of me.

Cushy sofas line the walls, and potted plants sit on the sills. Men and women work on their laptops, tablets, or their phones.

It all looks like an organized, creative mess.

Some of them sit on the couches, others straight on the floor.

There is no dress code— not that my firm has one; most of them wear jeans and T-shirts, while a few women sport maxi dresses.

There's no one running this mayhem.

A guy taking a break from fiddling with his tablet cares to ask me if I need help.

I come up with a story about a parcel needing to be returned and insist on leaving it with the person called JT, the initials posted on the shipping label.

Reluctantly, he pushes out of his chair and drags his feet to the other side of the room, where a few cubicles are carved into the wall. He motions to a girl who rises to her feet and walks around her desk, heading in my direction.

The man is quicker, making it back to me before her.

“Miss...?”

His eyebrows lift with a questioning look.

“Lloyd. Senna Lloyd.”

A smile lights up the man's face.

“Oh... You must be S. Lloyd. The owner of Stripped.”

“Yeah. That's me,” I say, stifling a grin.

He stretches his hand out to meet mine.

“Sean. I've read everything about your company,” he says as we shake hands. “She's looking for JT,” he tosses at the girl who stops near us.

“It was nice meeting you,” he says, still glancing over his shoulder in my direction as he smoothly pulls away.

The woman doesn't seem impressed with me.

She gives me a quick once over, expertly taking inventory of my dress and black heels. Eyes rooted on my handbag, she touches her phone screen and speaks softly in her earpiece.

"You have a visitor," she says, her eyes not leaving me for a second.

"Who is it?"

His voice lifts from the speaker, making me twice as nervous.

"Senna Lloyd. She's returning a package."

A pause ensues.

The woman flicks her eyes up, looking at me, intrigued.

"Let her in," he says evenly.

Expressionlessly, she motions to me to follow her.

A few strides later, we take a turn, walk a few steps down a corridor and stop in front of a wooden door.

She glances at me one last time before pushing the door open and gesturing me to step in.

Feet on his desk, laptop on his knees, Jaden shoots his gaze straight to me. The few moments I hold his eyes feel like an eternity before he flicks his hand and dismisses the woman waiting in the doorway.

"Close the door, Gabrielle."

The woman shuts the door behind me.

I take a couple of strides, stop across from him, and drop the box on his desk. It lands open, the top sliding off, the gown spilling out.

"You can do better than this. I don't need an apology. And sure enough, I don't need a new dress."

He slides the laptop onto his desk and rises to his feet. The moment he straightens, the whole room fills with his presence, making my pulse spike. I do my best to look unaffected while he searches my eyes, craving some answers.

He saunters in my direction, closing the distance between us. I take a step back.

He shoots his hand up.

“I’m not touching you,” he says.

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

His eyes shift to the box.

“You didn’t need to return the dress. I ruined it, and I wanted to replace it. That’s all,” he says.

“I don’t need anything from you.”

“I know...” he says in a softer voice and a trace of remorse in his tone.

“I’m sure there are women who can benefit from your attention. And your gifts. And whatever else you have to offer,” I say, throwing a casual glance at his suit pants, designer shoes, and slim-fit dress shirt, molded smoothly to his arms, chest, and shoulders.

He also casts a glance at me, his focus shifting to my hands.

“There are no women,” he says in a low voice, flicking his eyes up again.

His blue-gray gaze sinks into me.

“Do you expect me to believe you?” I ask.

He shrugs.

“It’s the truth. Would you rather hear a lie?”

“Whatever,” I say, flicking my hand. “It’s none of my business,” I say, moving toward the door.

He takes a step and blocks my exit.

“We’re not doing that again,” I say, arching an eyebrow at him.

“All I want is a chance to talk,” he says as if he hasn’t heard me.

I bring my hand to his chest.

His eyes stay locked with mine as I finger his chest.

“I don’t think I want to hear you talking, Jaden. You had your chance a year ago. You blew it. We wouldn’t be here had you not abandoned me. And for what? To make it on your own? You did? Was I holding you back?” I huff. “Please... Give me a break.”

He locks his jaw.

“I—”

I shoot my hand up.

“I don’t want to hear it again. You had your reasons. Fine. You left. It broke me. No problem. I glued myself back together, but don’t ask me to listen to you now. Nothing can make me feel better, no matter how legitimate your reasons are.”

His eyes slice through me.

“What are you afraid of?”

I chuckle.

“Me? Afraid? I’m not afraid of anything, baby. Why would I be afraid? What could possibly scare me? I lost everything that mattered to me a long time ago. I lived an empty life until I met you. I liked you. And trusted you. You were good to me in your twisted, dark way, but you couldn’t help it, could you? You took everything I’d given you and smashed it. Turned it into nothing. You warned me so many times, yet I didn’t want to listen to you. I couldn’t believe you’d do that to me. More so because you knew my pain. You knew how vulnerable I was. It was your pain too, and strangely, I found comfort in that thought. Somehow, I hoped that our fucked up past could give us a better future. But I was wrong. So fucking wrong.”

The silver-gray of his eyes glistens with emotion.

A sad smile tilts his lips.

I stop him again as he tries to say something.

“You want to know the truth, Jaden? I’ll give you the truth. You still have that power over me. I don’t know why, but you do. You are my home in ways I can’t explain. But you are not a safe home. And you must know that. There’s a different part of me that is so eager to live. A different kind of woman. She’s softer and tender and gets crushed easily. She’s the girl I resented so much I had to push into hiding. I thought she’d eventually go away. She didn’t. And she’s trusting you. She came back to me again. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It’s been a while since I looked like her. She’s beautiful and courageous and wants to live a full life, but see... This world is not for her. She’d get crushed by the people’s coldness and hurtful words and eventually die a slow, lonely death. As much as she likes you and responds to you, you can’t protect her.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. You left me once, Jaden. And many more times before that. You played with me, and that’s fine. I’m a big girl, and I can take a rough ride, but I can’t do that to her. If she falls for you and you break her heart, there’s nothing left for me. Nothing.”

# JADEN

THE SAME DAY.

“GOOD EVENING, MR. TAYLOR.”

I give the security guy a nod as I slide past the concierge desk.

The elevator takes me straight to the last floor, where the doors open, and I walk straight into my apartment.

I toss my phone and keys on a side table and walk to the bar, where I pour myself a glass of scotch and take a swig.

The liquid fire flows through my blood.

I bring the glass to my lips again while working my neckline open.

Cold air rolls over my chest.

I slide into an armchair and peer outside.

Tall buildings glow against the backdrop of the night, and I peek through lit windows to get a glimpse of other people's lives.

I scan bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens.

People sit around the tables, having dinner, watching, or getting ready to go out.

Bits and pieces of life.

Some good, some bad. Some obvious. And some secret.

The slightest dash of light threads into the sky at the horizon, where the new moon shines like a silver earring.

A few more moments pass, and I stare blankly, no longer watching what's in front of me but remembering things.

Sweets memories.

Glimpses of a long-gone life reviving the feelings of the past, glowing in the light of the forgiving present.

Sara, my parents, and I sitting around a campfire while on vacation at Lake Tahoe.

Jacob and Sara kissing in front of the school.

Our last Thanksgiving together before everything turned to dust.

I smile, recollecting the details— the napkins on the table, the plates, the flatware and the floral centerpiece.

I almost smell the pies. The apples and vanilla mixed with cinnamon.

My mother's grin.

She's always had a hard time stopping us— Jacob and me, from tasting them before dinner. We shared a sweet tooth.

Or perhaps my mother's pies were unbelievably good.

I think they were. She always put a lot of love into them.

My dad was so happy on that unforgettable night.

We sat around the table, and it snowed that night. By the time we ate dinner, everything was white outside.

I freeze that frame and put it back before moving up the timeline to the day Emma was born.

My smile fades.



Jacob and my parents were no longer there, but I hoped for a miracle.

I hoped she could bring into this world some of that magic.

And she did like she was a message from another realm.

When she took her first peek at this world, she brought with her my mother's eyes, Jacob's smile, and my father's frown.

She wiped life's slate clean and started writing a different story, carrying with her the memory of the people we so deeply loved.

Sara and I loved her instantly.

She was like a lighthouse, giving us hope and a new meaning to our struggle. No matter how shitty life was, her smile made it worth living.

That's how I learned how much power love brings into the life of those lucky to receive it.

That's how I learned how resilient life can be.

Her love taught me I could be the warmth in her smile, the glint in her eyes, and the strength in her wings.

I could be her haven until she's old enough to spread her wings and strong enough to face life's monsters.

Yes.

She taught me I was that kind of man.

And if I've done it once for her, I can do it again.



MY PHONE VIBRATES in my hand.

I slide my thumb over the screen. Sara's face comes into focus.

"Are you home already?"

"Yes."

“I thought you had a business dinner.”

“I rescheduled it.”

“The perks of being a boss,” she says, smiling.

Her hair is longer, curling at the tips.

I grin.

“Yeah... I guess so. How’s Emma?”

“She’s asleep now. She’s much better. We went to the doctor this morning.”

“Was it the flu?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there this weekend.”

“Don’t worry. She’s gonna be fine.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No. We’re good. If you want to...”

She pauses and moves her eyes to the side, listening.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, I thought I heard her voice.”

Her eyes come back to me.

“She keeps asking about those cupcakes you brought last time.”

“She liked them?”

“She loved them. I baked a batch for her, but she insisted yours were better.”

I laugh.

“She’s my kind of girl. We know desserts,” I say. “Not that yours aren’t just as good,” I add.

She holds her finger up.

“Don’t encourage her.”

“I don’t need to. She has a sweet tooth.”

“Yeah. Like you,” she says, chuckling.

“And Jacob,” I say.

Her smile fades.

“Yeah, like him too.”

She goes quiet, looking away again.

“Were you working?” I ask.

“I’m trying to finish a project.”

“How was your date night?” I ask.

“Good,” she murmurs, distracted.

Her eyes flick back to her to me.

“What?? What are you talking about? What dating?”

“Exactly.”

A smile rolls across her lips.

“Please... I’m not doing any dating.”

“It’s been a while.”

“I don’t need a date.”

“I know exactly what you need, but you’re not gonna find it staying home.”

“I don’t need that headache. Really.”

“It’s only a headache if you have no idea what you’re doing. I trust you know better than that.”

A soft laugh falls from her lips, brightening her eyes.

“I’m really not interested,” she says.

“Why not? In a few more months, you’re going to graduate. We can afford a babysitter if I can’t be there to stay with her.”

She waves me off, her eyes pulling away again.

“You’re still attractive...” I joke.

She laughs.

“You are such an ass,” she says quietly. “You think I know what to do, but frankly, I have no idea. I don’t know much about men. Jacob was the only man in my life.”

“You know people. Don’t worry about men. You’ll figure them out. You only need to stay away from jerks.”

She shakes her head.

“Yeah... I’m not sure about this dating thing. It’s a waste of time, in my opinion.”

“It’s not getting easier if you wait for it to happen.”

“It’s not only that. Nobody gets serious with someone with a kid.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I wouldn’t care,” I say.

She smiles.

“Men are not like you, Jaden.”

A few moments of silence pass.

I take a swig.

“Why don’t you date?” she asks.

“I’m busy.”

“You can’t possibly expect me to believe you?”

She gets busy with something on her lap, her gaze dipping before I hear her voice again.

“You still love her,” she says, flicking her eyes up.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play coy with me. You know what I’m talking about.”

I lean back in my chair, flashing a mysterious smile.

She wags her finger at me.

“I know you, Jaden. Better than I know myself. You wouldn’t be so hung up on her after all this time.”

“Where did you get that idea?”

She takes a long breath.

“Listen... I don’t know why you broke up with her—”

“I didn’t break up with her.”

She shoots me a stern look.

“Yes, you did. In the worst possible way. You didn’t even offer her an explanation.”

“I couldn’t.”

She gestures at me dismissively.

“Whatever. The thing is... You’re still thinking about her.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I know why you didn’t want to get close to her.”

“Do you?” I ask.

She studies me, intrigued.

“Yes, I do. It was complicated in the past, but now it’s different. I’m surprised you’re still single and don’t have someone slobbering over you.”

“What makes you think I don’t?” I ask quietly.

“I’m not talking casual hook-ups.”

“Maybe I didn’t find the right woman.”

“Or maybe you did, but you let her go.”

I set my glass on the side table, bury my face in my hands and then run my fingers through my hair.

A moment later, I raise my eyes back to her.

“It’s too late for that,” I say soberly.

“Why’s that?”

“She has no love left for me and no trust. Only hate.”



SENNA

“YOU CAN LEAVE IT OVER THERE.”

The receptionist sets the bouquet of roses on my desk. I scan the flowers briefly. Velvety, dark red roses. Sometimes they're white or pink or yellow.

It's been the tenth day now. They always come in pairs. One bouquet delivered to my office, and the other one to my home.

His handwritten notes always accompany them.

I'LL STOP SENDING flowers if you agree to meet with me.

JADEN.

I THROW the card into the garbage.

“Harper?”

Her chair scrapes the floor across the hallway before her silhouette fills my doorway.

She walks in. I motion to the flowers.

“For you.”

A blush spreads across her cheeks.

“I can't take them home anymore.”

“Why?”

“Abel started questioning me about them.”

I lift my eyebrows, smiling.

“He did?”

“Yes. And by the way, he thinks you’re wrong.”

“About what?”

“He says you should at least give him a chance,” she murmurs, pointing at the roses.

“What is he talking about?”

“He says he knows who’s sending them, and he also happens to believe a man who is that persistent deserves a second chance.”

I lean back in my chair, throwing her a vacant stare.

“I think he has a point,” she says, holding my gaze.

I let out a long breath.

It feels as if my soul leaves my chest.

“I’m afraid there’s more to the story than you two know.”

“Is there?”

We lock eyes.

“Even if that’s the case, what do you have to lose? You give him a chance. He screws it. Fine. You both move on.”

I hear Abel’s wisdom in her words.

I smile yet stay quiet.

“You know better,” she mutters before returning to her office.

My eyes go to my laptop.

A soft knock on the door makes me lift my gaze.

“Yes?”

“Senna Lloyd?”

I nod.

The courier walks in, hands me a large envelope, and points to a tablet where I scribble my name.

He gives me a short nod and spins away.

I briefly scan the address before snatching my keys, phone, and purse and pushing out of my chair.

I hurl one last glance at the roses and walk out the door.

“I’m going home,” I say, sticking my head inside Harper’s cubicle.

She sits at her desk, her back turned to me. She swivels in her chair, a colorful book in her hand.

A beautiful drawing graces the cover.

“What’s that?” I ask, slanting my gaze to the book.

“It’s... um... Children books. Product reviews,” she adds as I erase the gap between us.

More books are scattered across her desk, next to her laptop.

The covers are colorful, and the imagery is eye-catching.

I pick one.

It’s been some time since I’ve held a real book in my hand. They are smaller than adult books and have beautiful graphics and well-crafted words.

The cover design is tasteful, and the colors are great.

I opted against doing product reviews initially before I changed my mind.

Once we posted a few of them, they made the website traffic spike.

“They look lovely,” I murmur, sifting through.

“The stories are good too. I’ve checked several authors, but I like this one in particular,” she says, flipping the book over so I can see the cover. “This one is called Baby Bear. It’s about a playful baby bear who doesn’t listen to his mom and gets into trouble.”

Her eyes glitter with excitement as she relays the story to me.

She places the book on the table and leafs through it, showing me what she likes the most.



The drawings are cute and familiar, which makes no sense since I've never read children books.

"The other one in this series is called Lost Girl. It's about a girl who gets lost from her family and lives in a forest."

Thoughts start bouncing in my head. A memory I can't place. A conversation I once had, but I can't see the connection to these books.

"Who's the author?" I ask.

She checks the cover.

"Hope Evans."

"Okay," I murmur, baffled. "Can I have them over the weekend? I'll bring them back on Monday morning."

"Sure. Which one?"

"These two. Are there any other books by this author?"

She fumbles through the stack and pulls out the third one.

"The Glass Boy."

"Sounds creepy," I say.

She smiles.

"It's not. It's about a boy held captive in a glass tower, surrounded by a land of beauty. A place only he can see, but he can never touch, taste or feel. It ends well, though," she says, catching the shift in my expression.

She shoves the books into a small box and places them in my arms.

"Call me if you need me," I toss to her on my way out.

One hour later, I enter my home.

# S ENNA

I DROP everything on the couch, make a beeline for the bedroom, take a quick shower and change into shorts and a T-shirt. I walk back to the living room, pick up the envelope and the books, and walk outside.

Spring is here, but it already feels like summer, except today.

The temperature is mild, and dry air still is moving in.

It's also breezy, the wind making the water ripple in the pool. I set everything on the patio table and stroll back inside, heading to the kitchen.

Cold tiles stretch beneath my feet.

I scoop out a bottle of water from the fridge and pour myself a cup of coffee. Balancing the bottle and the cup, I saunter back to the backyard.

I place everything on the table and make a second trip to the house to pick up my phone and tablet.

A text message arrives as I return. Right on time. I text him back.

I received the package.

I should've done this a while ago and saved myself a lot of trouble. I move my focus to the envelope.

The PO Box address is printed in the upper left corner.

I'd lie to say I'm not nervous. My pulse vibrates in my ears as I tear the envelope open. I let the content slide onto the table—a memory stick, and a written report.

This could've easily turned creepy, so I had to draw a line.

I asked for a few surveillance clips, the official business information, and PI's analysis based on that.

I take a sip of coffee and check the report first.

Jaden's business is filed as an Internet Publishing Company. It owns several web properties and a couple of apps.

Amongst the assets, a magazine, a messaging app, and a curator's site.

After selling his first website, he cashed out on a second web property. A website very similar to mine, curating content that's monetized with ads.

That site alone brought in more traffic in a few months than my own website the entire year.

He sold it for a lot of cash, that sale alone fueling the flurry of web properties he owns right now.

He learned fast and acted even faster. A rare quality.

A smile tickles my lips.

I scan the document further.

He lives in one of the luxury skyscrapers with high-end condos downtown. High-worth, tech tycoons live there.

Young, eligible men.

With shaky hands, I plug the memory stick into my laptop.

A bunch of photographs pops up, and for a moment, I'm unsure if I want to go through with this or not.

I take a few deep breaths before clicking on the first folder and reviewing the pictures.

Taken with a long lens, the snapshots have captured moments of his life these past ten days. The second his image comes into focus, I find myself gasping.

I slowly trail my fingertips over the photographs as if I want to touch him and feel him. Feel the new him. The man is clad in a suit and a dress shirt. The man with his hair combed back, his blue-gray eyes holding so much magnetic power.

Some of the close-ups make my heart skip beats.

Those intense, hypnotic eyes harbor now subdued power.

No more 'living on the fringe' glint he had in his gaze the first time I met him.

This power comes with money.

So, I was right.

It's right there in his eyes. I can see it. Feel it. It's not the same for everybody. In some people, it looks like greed; in others, it feels like turmoil. Some people fear losing all that power, while others wear it naturally.

That's him.

He looks detached and in control.

As I sift through the pictures, other people pop up. And that was the whole point. To find out who he really is. Who he has become.

I wanted raw, unedited information. I wanted facts.

One hard fact is the beautiful brunette who kept him company the first night I met him.

It comes as no surprise that spurs turmoil inside me. In all corners of my body, panic grows in spades.

One night he brings her home. A couple of nights later, they have dinner. He drives her home again. She invites him inside.

She doesn't live alone, the report says. In fact, she's married to Adam Sanders, a CEO, who runs a multi-million dollar corporation and travels quite a bit.

Oh, my God.

The same evening, Adam comes home half an hour later.

For two hours, no one leaves the place.

Close to midnight, Jaden jogs down the stairs, climbs into his car, and goes home. A different report includes the PI analysis, shedding light on the couple's life.

Happily married, the woman is a trust fund baby and owns a business, while her husband, Adam, is a self-made millionaire.

A third snapshot captures Jaden and Adam at an exclusive restaurant downtown.

Seated at a table by the window, the men spend time together, drinking, laughing, and conversing before the woman joins them.

The last pictures show Jaden and the woman in front of the restaurant. He's getting ready to leave.

She curls her arms around his neck, looking for his lips. She gives him a soft kiss.

My eyes blur with tears.

Pissed, I blink them back.

There are no more pictures of this woman, but two other women visit his apartment several times.

One blonde, one brown-haired. Both are young and beautiful, wearing high heels and skin-tight dresses.

They come and leave at approximately the same time, spending roughly a couple of hours with him. There are no public pictures with them, simply because they don't cross paths outside his home, but one shows the three of them in the foyer and then outside the building just before the women enter a limousine.

The PI analysis report indicates the women are a couple and business partners running a successful lingerie company.

My lips get dry.

I gulp water from the bottle, staring vacantly at the lawn.

I slant my eyes back to the report. There are no out-of-town trips, no other visitors except for a maid and food deliveries.

He has no debt.

He's spent most of his days at his business and at home, except when he went out with the brunette and her husband or killed a few hours at their home.

His cell phone number and home address are attached to the report.

I pick up my phone from the table and call him.

He answers at the second ring. His voice carries a soft rasp that makes me shudder.

"Yes?" he asks.

I stay quiet, unable to speak.

"Senna?"

I clear my voice.

"How do you know it's me?"

"How come you have my number?"

I hear a smile in his voice.

"Don't get cute with me," I say, already losing the battle.

He stays silent long enough to let me gather my thoughts and find my voice.

"I hired a private investigator," I say and pause, waiting for his reaction.

It comes.

"Okay..."

His voice is heavier than moments ago. I can tell it affects him.

"Why did you—?"

“I wanted to know the truth from someone who wasn’t biased like me,” I interrupt him.

“You could’ve asked me. I would’ve given you the truth,” he says.

I sense the sadness in his voice.

And then I feel my tears at the edge of my lashes.

“This is not easy for me, Jaden.”

“I didn’t say it would be.”

“I’m not gonna pretend I know what I’m doing, or I follow some plan. I don’t. Everything looks messy and conflicted, but this is the best I can do right now.”

“Okay,” he says softly.

“I hired him because I wanted to know more before deciding whether I wanted to talk to you or not.”

Silence comes from the other end of the line.

“I have a few questions...” I say.

“Do you want to meet me somewhere?”

I ponder.

“Yes. Tonight at eight. The place where you had dinner with Crystal and Adam Sanders last time.”

I pause, expecting a reaction.

“Okay,” he says, his voice unreadable. “Do you want me to pick you up?”

“I’ll meet you there.”

# S ENNA

I SPEND some time choosing a dress for our meeting.

I don't want to show up in something frivolous as much as I don't want to look like I'm decked out for a funeral.

Between chiffon dresses, silk frocks, and knitted little numbers, I opt for a one-shoulder pencil dress, closing neatly down my side.

The eggplant color compliments my skin and eyes, and the subtle jewelry— a pair of earrings and a bracelet—adds a bit of spark.

I brush all my hair to the side and let it cascade down my bare shoulder.

A few moments later, I examine my reflection in the mirror. I smile, satisfied with the nice touch given by the light makeup.

Close to seven o'clock, I pull the car out of the garage and head downtown.

I purposely arrive late.

Half an hour later, I drop my keys in the valet's hand and enter the restaurant. It's spacious, with tall windows, high ceilings, and tucked-in booths.



He sits by the window at a round table for two. Facing the main door, he catches sight of me as soon as I walk in.

He holds my eyes while I strut across the room, his intense gaze making me weak in my knees.

A white shirt outlines his broad shoulders and the hardness of his chest. A silver blue tie and matching cufflinks give elegance to his outfit.

His hair is all combed back, his eyes narrowing with a smile while delving into mine.

I tear my gaze away the moment I reach our table.

He motions to the hostess, rises to his feet, and pulls the chair out for me.

“You okay?” he asks, concern threading through his voice.

“Yes,” I say, trying to sound casual and relaxed.

Swiveling my head, I take in the beautiful decor.

“You like it?” he murmurs.

“Yes.”

“But that’s not why you picked this place,” he says as he sinks into his seat.

We break eye contact as the sommelier pours wine into our glasses. The man walks away, and I raise my eyes to meet Jaden’s.

There’s no smile on his face.

“No. That’s not why I chose this place. You said you wanted to talk, and I said I had some questions.”

He nods softly in agreement.

My eyes dip to his lips as he takes a sip of wine.

“Let’s start with this,” I say. “We tell each other the truth, no matter how painful or hurting it is. Would that be okay with you?”

He searches my eyes, briefly dropping his gaze to my lips and then my hands before giving me a slow nod.

“Okay. There’s only one thing. I don’t want the truth to pull us apart. That’s not why we’re here,” he says.

A bitter smile comes to my lips.

“Isn’t it a little too late for that?”

He tilts his chin down and purses his lips, his eyes still rooted to mine.

“Fine,” I say, flicking my hand.

“I’d rather have this conversation somewhere else,” he says calmly, studying me.

“I’m not gonna throw a fit in the middle of the restaurant.”

He lowers his eyes, suppressing a smile.

“That’s not what I had in mind.”

“This place is as good as any, then.”

“Okay,” he finally concedes, bringing his glass to his mouth again.

I take in his hands, the masculine line of his jaw, and the sexy contour of his lips. He takes another swig of wine, and I stare blankly at his mouth while tasting my drink.

“Are you ready to order?” he asks.

“Yeah, sure.”

We place the order.

As the waiter pulls away from our table, I pop the first question.

“So, who is Crystal Sanders?”

A thought glints through his eyes before he moves his gaze away.

“You’ve done your research,” he finally says, raising his eyes to me again, mixed feelings flashing through them.

He hurts. I can tell. What I don’t know is whether the memory of that woman affects him.

Or is it me asking the question or this whole conversation?

“Yes I have, but I don’t have eyes in your bedroom. So who is she?”

He slides his elbows onto the table, and for a moment, he trains his eyes on his hands.

Sorrow courses through his eyes.

“She was a client.”

My heart sinks.

“What kind of client?”

He glances out of the window.

“The old kind.”

I lean back in the chair.

“She’s married.”

“Yeah, she is.”

He shifts his focus back inside and stares vacantly at me.

“He hired me.”

“You spent evenings at their home. He was there.”

“Yeah... We both fucked her,” he says casually, his eyes evading mine.

His posture relaxes as if a weight has lifted off his chest.

“If he was home, we’d fuck at their place, and he’d be part of it. If he wasn’t home, I’d fuck her at my place, or in the car... or whatever place would catch her imagination or mine.”

“And he knew?”

“Every fucking thing. That was the whole deal. He wanted her satisfied and also to have a sense of control over her. He liked me, and I liked him.”

“Have you two...?”

“Touch each other?” he offers, the ghost of a smile brushing his lips. “No. But he liked to share her. He got

extremely turned on when we double-penetrated her. And she was fucking hot.”

I clench my teeth, my nails digging into the tablecloth.

“You wanted the truth, Senna,” he says, flashing a cold smile.

“I’m good,” I say, pretending I don’t care.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Them? A couple of months.”

“Like a menage?”

“Hardly. We’re all busy people, but you probably know that.”

“You were with her at that event.”

“She was there because of her business. He couldn’t make it on time, and I kept her company.”

“How could you do that?” I ask, struggling with disbelief.

“Keeping her company?” he asks, his dark humor hurting him as much as it hurts me.

“Fucking her for money.”

“It wasn’t the money. I don’t need to do anything for money.”

“Was it fun?”

He slowly shakes his head, staring blankly at the table.

“It was at the moment, but it never lasted.”

“Why would you do it?”

A sad chuckle almost doesn’t make it to his lips.

His handsome face is drenched in sadness.

“It was the same old reason?”

The corners of his lips lift into a bitter smile, his eyes avoiding mine.

“It was.”

“Why?”

“I wasn’t looking for it... And I never thought I’d do it again,” he says and stops, and my heart starts crying for him. “In a way, it’s like some bad food you’ve got so used to that you’re no longer looking for something else. So I went back to it.”

“I meant nothing to you, didn’t I?” I ask, my voice so quiet I wonder if he heard me.

From where I sit, I can see the soft tears lining his lashes.

He keeps his chin down and makes an effort to keep his expression from changing but even so, I can see the pain on his face.

“You meant everything to me,” he says, and my heart breaks.

“How can you say that to me?” I mutter in utter disbelief.

He lifts his gaze. I slump in my seat.

A smile brushes his lips as he takes in my expression.

Surprise, regret, and ache he must see on my face. I feel bad for him and me. For us.

“It’s not fair...” I murmur, drowning in his eyes.

“It’s the truth,” he says, and then I see it in his gaze.

The love he never wanted to confess. The love he hid from me. The love he couldn’t let me have.

“Why, Jaden? Why would you do that?”

A sad smile sparks in his eyes.

He briefly looks away.

“Why?” I ask again, sliding my hand on top of his.

He feels warm beneath my touch.

His eyes move back to me.

“You know why. I think you knew it even back then.”

Disappointed, I pull my hand away.

He gently stops me and grips my hand, my fingers getting lost in the cushion of his palm.

“Had I not left, we would’ve destroyed each other.”

My mouth falls open in surprise.

He slowly nods, his eyes flashing sadness and compassion.

“We would’ve slipped into a different madness and ended up hating each other. That’s one of the reasons why I left.”

My skin gets cold against his touch.

“How is this better than that?”

He ponders.

“This is our chance. Had I stayed, we wouldn’t have even that.”

I look at him in silence, no longer caring that tears flood my eyes and some of them drop on the tablecloth.

“You didn’t even ask me,” I say.

“You would’ve said no.”

My jaw is too tense to speak.

He tips his chin down, and briefly, his gaze roams over our hands.

“None of us could control how we felt back then. We were both still bleeding. Both tormented by our past and loneliness and the possibility that we had found our match. I knew how you felt. I knew how much you needed me, but I wasn’t stable enough to give you what you wanted.”

He gently strokes my hand as he smiles at a private thought.

“When you started to tell me about your life and how you were before you met me, you also shone a light on that part of me. One I never thought I had. Not for a woman, anyway. I kept that side of me only for myself and the few things dear to me. Emma and Sara. My drawings. Sometimes the words I cared to write down. I never imagined I could find a woman I could give that tenderness. And I never thought I’d found that

kind of place in someone else's heart. But you, like me, were not safe..." he says and smiles again. "You could sink into darkness at the drop of a hat and pull me down just as fast. I was no different than you."

He pauses.

"The few days we spent in that cabin allowed me to see more of us. The way we could've been had we not been damaged. The way we could've lived had we not battled monsters, bad memories, and the wrath of our ugly past."

His lips curve into a soft grin.

"But seeing that sobered me up. It made me aware of the hurdles lying ahead of us. It made me realize that no matter what my heart whispered to me, the reality was different. What seemed within our reach couldn't be farther away from us."

"You could've talked to me."

He searches my eyes.

"Words couldn't do what time needed to do."

We both lift our gazes as the servers bring the plates of food to the table.

We're waiting in silence as they set them down.

Jaden and one of the men exchange words that only register with me remotely, my mind still processing what he just told me.

He shifts his focus back, but neither of us begins to eat.

He pushes the plate farther away from him, his lack of appetite mirroring my feelings.

I don't feel like eating, either.

"That very last night..." he says softly, resuming his story, "was like a crossroads to me. I didn't see it coming because it hadn't been planned. No one could plan something like that. Things weren't as clear to me back then as they are now. I knew it would hurt both of us, but I had to do it. When I realized we were both captives of our past, and time wasn't on our side, and that I was nowhere near being the man capable of

pulling you up and you were nowhere near being the woman ready to heal my heart, I only saw one way out. Pull everything to a stop, smash everything to pieces and perhaps rebuild later. Let time do its job. Let our hearts find their way. And let myself be the man I wanted for you.”

“You were that man,” I say.

He grins.

A soft, beautiful smile.

“No, I wasn’t. I was the sole provider for my sister and my niece. I was also someone who worked for you. I had nothing in my name. I might’ve not been on the streets, but I was still a hustler. The world I had in my mind for you, and us, wasn’t within my reach. The world in which I’d be the stable ground for you wasn’t within my grasp. Money was only part of the problem, but there were other things.”

His face brightens with a grin as his eyes set on his hands.

“It was ironic in a way. I knew what you were missing. I used to have what you were missing. But I no longer had it. Therefore, I couldn’t give it to you. Besides, you lived in a different world. One in which I had to find my way. One in which I was the poor boy while you were the rich girl. Both of us hated our lives, but none of us knew what the answer was. Was there a way to get out of it and find a different path? You thought you knew that but didn’t have the right answer either. At least it wasn’t the right one for me. That’s why I said I had to do what I had to do on my own. I also had to see if more was out there for us.”

He glances at me briefly before bringing his glass to his lips. The ruby liquid moistens his lips, making them glisten.

A bittersweet grin kisses his lips as he relives that memory.

“If you think it was easy for me, you’re wrong. It wasn’t easy at all. If you think I’d forgotten about you, I hadn’t. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. The emotions we had for each other spun out of control back then and made sex addictive and unimaginably beautiful. It raised what could’ve been ordinary fucking to a memorable experience. Love does that to



sex. It turns it into the ultimate thrill. That's why people fall so hard. And that's why we did. We got lost in each other. That's why it was so painful to tear away from you, but I knew that by doing so, our story would live on. No love story ever dies until it lives its life and reaches its conclusion. That's what I counted on. And that's why we're here tonight," he says, his eyes sinking into mine.

He pauses.

There's nothing I can add to that.

"Let's eat," he mutters in a different voice, motioning to the plates. "The food is getting cold."

# S ENNA

WE EAT IN SILENCE.

Once in a while, I glance at him, realizing how much I missed this familiar sight. Us eating together. Him never rushing.

We order desserts soon after.

Chocolate cake for him and strawberry mousse for me. I fidget a little until I voice a nagging question.

“Since when is she no longer your client?”

He brings his eyes to me.

“Crystal Sanders?”

“Yes.”

“The night I met you.”

I’m waiting for him to elaborate.

“I ended it officially a few nights back.”

“The night you had dinner with them?”

He nods.

“Was that a goodbye kiss?”

“Yes, it was,” he says, holding my eyes. “She wasn’t what you think she was.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Would that be all?” the server asks, his gaze skimming the table.

“Yes,” Jaden says.

“I’ll have them boxed,” the man says, sweeping the dessert plates off the table.

Minutes later, he brings back a cute box adorned with a bow and the check. Jaden hands him his card, and we wait a few more moments until the man returns with the receipt. I hook my finger under the golden ribbon and pick up the box as we both rise to our feet, ready to leave.

I saunter in front of him, heading for the exit, when his hand slides to the small of my back.

“Let me take you home,” he says. “We’ll use your car, and I’ll come back later to pick up my mine.”

I glance at him.

“No. Follow me. We’ll finish the dessert and the conversation at my place,” I say.

Minutes later, we slide through the gates and park the cars in front of my house.

He’s waiting for me while I climb out.

I push the main door open and walk inside before turning the lights on.

A glow spreads over the backyard.

“Go ahead,” I say, gesturing to the patio. “I’ll bring the plates out. Do you want anything to drink?” I ask.

“No alcohol. Anything else is good,” he says, strolling to the table.

Moments later, I set plates, glasses, and a couple of water bottles on the table.

“The place looks nice,” he says, glancing around.

“It is. I no longer spend much time at home. So there isn’t enough time for me to make a mess. That’s probably one of the reasons.”

His lips part as if wanting to relay something.

“They no longer work for me,” I say, anticipating his question.

He lifts an eyebrow.

“The men.”

“What happened to them?” he asks.

“School. One got married, and the other moved out of state.”

“You didn’t replace them.”

“There was no point in doing that.”

He moves his focus to the slice of cake.

“So, back to Crystal,” I say and pause while indulging in a spoon of strawberry mousse. “She must have a great husband.”

A faint smile tugs at his lips.

“He’s smart, confident. Loyal. He loves her deeply, and she loves him too. She’s aware she struck luck with him. Not many men would agree to this type of arrangement.”

“Would you?”

He takes a sip of water, evading my eyes.

“I don’t know.”

“The truth, Jaden.”

“This is the truth. I used to believe I could. It was a fantasy of mine, and it still is. It’s hot if there’s trust and boundaries in place and those involved in it like each other. But now, I’m not so sure.”

“Why?”

“I learned how easily you could lose someone you love. I’m not sure I could take that risk.”

“Would you share me?”

He brings his gaze to me, surprised, his eyes searching mine.

“I don’t have you. Therefore I can’t share you.”

He stares at his plate.

“Probably not,” he murmurs, pondering.

“What if I’d ask you to?”

He shoots his eyes at me. He looks torn. Unsure whether this is a trap. Aching that I even asked him that.

He recovers quickly.

“It depends,” he says. “There’s a time for lust, and there’s a time to heal. They have a solid, tested relationship. No wounds to heal, no dark past. They’re loyal to each other, and it’s a nice way to spice things up for them. They’re both smart and enjoy the thrill, but we’ve all abided by the rules. He’s laid the terms for me, and I’ve honored each of them.”

He briefly looks away before bringing his eyes back.

“To go back to your question. I’m not intimidated by another man if that’s what you’re asking. Would that answer your question?”

I nod.

“What about the pair of women?”

He stretches an amused smile.

“You do have a good PI,” he says.

“Yeah. I like to hire the best professionals I can find.”

He gets a glimpse of my smile.

“I didn’t fuck them. We discussed business.”

I quietly laugh.

“Must have been a hell of a business.”

He gives me a secret grin.

“Actually, their business wasn’t for me. They have a solid company, but I’m not interested in the retail space. So that’s that.”

He drinks water.

“What about you. Would you share a man you love?”

The question takes me by surprise. I remember my reaction when I saw Crystal’s arms wrapped around him.

“No.”

“Hmm.”

His nose creases with a smile.

He slides his hand inside his suit jacket, retrieves a cigarette from his pocket, and lights it. The orange dot glows briefly as he takes a drag.

A few moments pass.

He muses over something while I drink in his features. And then his expression changes.

“I know that some things may no longer be possible between us,” he says in a serious, even voice. “But I’m hoping we can figure out which are and which aren’t, and if nothing comes out of it, then fine, we can both move on.”

We lock eyes.

“For starters, we can still talk and eat dessert together,” he says in a lighter tone.

I smile.

“Yes, that’s good, I guess. But things could’ve been much different. I could’ve been with someone else by now,” I say.

He examines my face.

“Are you with someone else?”

“No.”

“Were you?” he asks and takes another drag before narrowing his eyes and releasing a long stream of smoke.

“I think you know the answer.”

A soft grin brushes his lips.

“Any paid help?” he asks, still smiling.

“No,” I say, lowering my eyes and focusing on my mousse.

I sink my spoon into the creamy dessert and bring it to my lips. The aroma fills my mouth.

“What happened to your old friend?” he asks.

He blows out the smoke and puts out the cigarette.

“Abel?” I ask as he takes a bite of chocolate cake.

“Mm-hmm,” he says, grinning around the spoon. “You said he was running a promotion,” he adds. “What was that all about?”

He glances at me just as the warmth of a blush rolls over my cheeks.

“Long story. Alcohol was involved. And a party.”

“Is he still around?” he asks, no longer smiling.

He sets the spoon on the plate.

“Yes, he is,” I say, smirking.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, not at all amused.

“I just like to fuck with you.”

His eyes brighten.

“Really? Can’t you do it in some other way?”

“Haha. Funny,” I say, pointing in his direction with my spoon.

I take another mouthful of mousse.

“He is off the market,” I say.

“How come?”

He pushes the plate to the side and gulps water, his eyes trained on me.

“Harper hooked up with him.”

His eyebrows lift in surprise.

“How did that happen?” he asks.

“Same party.”

“Okay... Am I missing something?”

I lower my eyes.

“It wasn’t such a good story,” I say, no longer smiling.  
“But in the end, something good came out of it.”

The growing silence makes me raise my eyes.

“I’m not proud of it,” I finally say.

“I’m not the one to judge. Life is messy, most of the time, anyway, but once in a while—as you just said—something good comes along.”

His gaze dips to his phone.

“I need to go,” he says, pushing his chair back.

I follow his example, and we both walk inside.

He collects his car keys in the foyer while I hold the door open for him. Hesitantly, he stalls for a moment, his eyes roving over me.

“I’ll see you then,” he says.

Silently, I nod.

He spends a few more seconds on me before pulling away and striding to his car.

“It’s Harper’s birthday next Friday,” I toss behind his back.

He stops and turns around.

“I’d like you to come with me. We go out to a restaurant.”

He ponders.

“Sure.”

“You can pick me up.”

“We’ll talk before then. I hope.”

I smile.

“Yes, we will,” I say.





JADEN

LIGHT FILTERS THROUGH THE WINDOWS, and soft music echoes in the air as I pull my car in front of her house on Friday evening.

I'm early.

I'm nervous.

And I truly hope she hasn't changed her mind.

I push the door open and enter the living room. Her voice comes from the bedroom.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes. Get yourself a drink," she says.

"I'm good," I say, stepping onto the terrace.

My eyes follow the hypnotic dance of the paper lights swaying in the breeze.

"Hey."

Her voice rings behind me.

"Hey," I say, turning around and drinking her in.

My heart races as I lay my eyes on her.

She's never looked so beautiful. And different.

"You look good," I murmur, perfectly aware my words don't do her justice.

Her eyes glitter with excitement, a warm smile curving her lips.

I look at her, dumbstruck.

"Are you okay?" she asks, noticing my bewilderment.

"Yes. I like your dress," I murmur, running my gaze over her.

Her dress hits above her knees, a tasteful combination of black lace and chiffon, a molded bustier, and a pencil skirt.

Long sparkling earrings almost touch her shoulders.

Her hair waves down her back, her eyes sparkling, full of life, dark amber gleaming between canopies of curled, raven lashes.

A glistening layer of lipstick highlights her lips.

“You like it?”

“Yes,” I murmur.

She checks the time, grabs a small purse, and curls her hand around mine. I hold her tightly. It’s soft and warm, pulsing with life.

Smiling, she gives me a quick once-over.

“You look great as well,” she says, running her eyes over my tailored shirt and pants.

Her gaze sweeps my clean-shaven face, her lips pursing.

I look at her, mystified.

“Ready?” she asks, gently squeezing my hand.

“Um... Yes. Ready,” I say, leading her to the door.

Minutes later, we drive downtown.

She stretches her legs, meeting my eyes as I give her a side-eyed glance.

A smile creases her lips.

“You look different,” I say.

A mysterious grin makes her eyes twinkle.

“I feel good. And I haven’t been out in a while. Besides last week, I’ve never had a night out as a couple with someone.”

“We’re not a couple... yet.”

Grinning, she looks out the window, averting her eyes.

“Do you want us to be?” she asks.

“Is that even a question?”

She looks at me.

“I’m testing you.”

Smiling, I shake my head.

“No, no. No testing, please.”

She gazes out the window again.

“I think we’ve been a couple for some time,” she says.

“You think so?”

She turns her head to me.

“Yes. I think we’ve been a couple all this time. Even when we were apart. It’s not something we could plan. It’s in our blood.”

She laughs softly.

I don’t.

“What makes you say that?”

“After you left...” she says. “Things weren’t the same for me. I was angry and blowing off steam. I felt trapped, and I was...”

She pauses, looking at me as if expecting me to contest what she just said.

“I couldn’t understand why you did it,” she continues. “I thought you had so much for me in you. But in the end, I had to let it go. It didn’t matter what I did or how hard I fought your memory. The change was done. The bond was sealed. The things that used to work for me no longer did. My life was different. Different than before I met you.”

I look at her.

“I felt the same way.”

I bury her hand in mine and bring it to my lips.

She stares at me, motionless, as I gently place a kiss on the back of her knuckles.

A fine shiver goes through her before I let her free.

She looks out of the window again.

“Here... This is the place.”

I pull up in front of the restaurant, and a valet rushes to attend to us. I climb out and give him the key before swiftly striding to her side, opening the door, and helping her out.

Our bodies touch for a moment while she struggles to maintain her balance.

I curl my arm around her waist and press her into me. Her hands slide to my chest, her eyes flicking up to me.

Fluid electricity barrels through me.

I drink her in, instantly getting hot for her.

It's the warmth of her body and her scent.

It's the shiver rushing through her frame and the gleaming in her eyes.

It's everything.

And above all, it's the idea that after all this time, she's back in my arms. More beautiful than ever. Softer, brimming with emotions.

She blinks a couple of times, small gasps escaping her lips.

“I'm good,” she says, tearing away from me, her fingers still laced with mine.

A playful smile tugs at her lips as she leads me inside.

# JADEN

ABEL AND HARPER wait for us, seated.

It's a nice place with a dark interior, opulent lights, white linens, and floral arrangements on the tables.

Harper spots us first.

She waves at us, her eyes sparkling as she gets a glimpse of me. Not because of me. But because I'm accompanying Senna.

She shifts her eyes to Abel, whose back is turned to us. It takes me less than five seconds to realize she's fallen hard for the man sitting across from her.

Nonetheless, this is going to be a hell of an encounter.

Senna and I walk to the table.

They both rise. Harper hugs Senna, who wishes her Happy Birthday, and then she waves at me.

I nod and give her a soft kiss on her cheek, wishing her all the best.

Senna hands her a birthday present.

I turn to Abel, who witnesses everything in silence.

He stretches his hand out to connect with mine, our eyes locking in an instant. The brief, mutual surveillance leaves us both satisfied.

He's a handsome man. Laid back, confident, oozing sexual prowess. I realize how lucky I am that Senna didn't fall for him.

And I'm not gonna fool myself. Sex is not what kept her away from him. I'm sure he left her satisfied.

He hugs Senna, his lips brushing her cheek, his hands holding hers tenderly, his gesture telling me so much about their long history together.

His eyes are warm, with no trace of flirting.

He brings his gaze to me, sending me a clear message. He's not gonna mess with what is mine.

He likes me, and I can't deny it. I like him too.

We all get seated and focus on the birthday girl.

As the night progresses, we relax, the food and wine making the atmosphere enjoyable.

Jokes float around, and laughter hovers over the table.

Senna's eyes sparkle with joy, while Harper's beam with love for Abel.

Her man enjoys everything with undeniable class.

I sense Senna's stare a couple of times, especially when I interact with Abel.

After dinner, he invites us to his place for drinks.

We end up in a beautiful house not far from Senna's place. Judging by the way her eyes scan his home, I can tell she's never been here before.

It's not the neat, sophisticated decor that baffles her. I suspect she never knew they were practically neighbors.

He brings our drinks to the table as we all settle in the lounge area, not far from the pool.

As the night unfolds, we engage in a conversation that spans a variety of topics, revealing Harper's love for literature and Abel's passion for the animal charity.

Soon, Harper starts cuddling in Abel's arms, and I motion to Senna while rising to my feet.

They both push out of their chairs as well.

Abel and I shake hands while Senna hugs Harper goodbye.

Moments later, we slip out the door and climb into my car. We drive back in silence.

"You had fun?" I ask after a while.

"Yes," she says in a soft, nostalgic voice.

"What happened?"

She brings her eyes to me and smiles.

"Nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing."

She shrugs, glancing out the window again.

"I'm happy for them."

"Me too," I say, slipping a subtle undertone.

She laughs.

"You can be funny sometimes," she says, amused.

"I hope that's not my only quality."

"No," she says, distracted again.

And sad.

My chest tightens with apprehension.

I hope it's the alcohol.

I hope it's anything other than what I think it is.

As we near her home, she's even more distracted. And I get tenser.

I pull the car to a stop and wait.

She doesn't say a thing. I crack the driver's door open to climb out and help her. Her hand grips mine, stopping me.

"Don't. I'm fine."

My heart shatters into pieces.

"You're not giving up on me, are you?" I ask.

She turns her eyes to me, filled with tears.

"I've never given up on you, Jaden. Even when I wanted to, I couldn't."

"What is it then?"

She slowly shakes her head, a tear streaming down in silence, starkly contrasting her beautiful face.

I slide my hand on top of hers and slowly run my thumb across her knuckles.

"What is it, Senna?"

She runs a trembling hand beneath her eyes.

"Tonight was one of the best nights I've ever had..." she says. "I was so happy. I haven't felt so good and normal in a very long time. And as I was sitting there, I couldn't forget how we all got there."

She bites her lip to stop the quivering of her chin, more tears trickling down.

"And I felt so bad for everyone around the table. For Harper and Abel. For me being part of his past. And then for you and me. For us trying to build a normal life on what's practically a ruin.

I shake my head.

"It's not a ruin, baby. The past serves a purpose. I no longer think about it. And you shouldn't either."

"I don't want to be that woman, Jaden. The one who destroys other people's lives."

"You're not."



I wrap my arms around her. To my surprise, she also curls her arms around me, and hope flares in my heart.

I frame her face and wipe her tears away.

She raises her eyes.

It dawns on me this is way more than I thought. The realization hits me right away.

This is the woman she was talking about. Vulnerable, delicate, and frankly, so lonely. She's always been wild and stubborn and tough, but something must've happened to her.

It may be me or the universe switching things for her, but she's morphing into this beautiful woman under my very eyes.

She's even more powerful than before.

All I want is to be there with her the day she sheds her skin for good. When she becomes that beautiful person who is struggling right now, caught between two worlds, pushing away from her past while longing for a different future.

Maybe it was all meant to be.

“Let me love you, Senna,” I murmur in her hair as she starts sobbing at my chest. “The way you always wanted it. The way nobody loved you before. Okay?”

She gives me a soft nod while shuddering in my arms.

“I'm not gonna rush, baby. All right? And I'm gonna be there for you, but you have to come to me, too.”

“I will...” she murmurs, brushing her tears away.

I tilt her face up and slide my thumb across her lips. A soft quiver ripples beneath my touch.

“I missed you, baby,” I say.

“I missed you, too,” she murmurs before our lips connect into a soft, unhurried kiss.



SENNNA

I WAVE him goodbye while he steers his car away.

My tears still stain my cheeks as I spin around and walk inside the house.

The place is quiet and empty, but I no longer feel lonely. I quickly shower, slip into my pajamas and go to bed.

A box of books is on the nightstand for me.

First, I pick up my phone and slide my finger across the screen, pulling up a bunch of photographs. Taking my time, I examine the pictures we've captured in the restaurant.

I zoom in on their faces.

Harper has never looked more beautiful. Dressed in a dark green dress, she's smiling from ear to ear, her eyes sparkling with love for Abel, who looks at her, entranced.

I study myself in a few frames. My frown is gone, and the pursing of my lips has vanished too. Relaxed, I grin and glance at them, a sparkle gleaming in my eyes as well, while Jaden's eyes are almost always on me.

I study him slowly, running my fingers over his picture.

It feels strange.

Surreal.

It's hard to comprehend that this is the same man I once spotted sitting on a sidewalk in front of Jill's.

The man I found one night, his body slashed and bloodied, lying on the ground.

The man who played with me and tied me to the bed.

The man who fucked me any way I wanted, fulfilling all my secret fantasies.

A different man looks at me in these pictures.

His eyes no longer harbor anger but warmth and calmness.

He's no longer a dark storm but a soothing breeze.

He no longer burns me down but warms me up.

He no longer raises walls between us but wraps me in his protecting arms.

His gray eyes gleam nostalgic as he teaches me to be a woman no longer tormented by her past. A woman watching the world with fresh eyes.

It takes a few more moments before I drag my finger over the screen and turn my phone off.

I glance at the nightstand, the box of books catching my eye. I set my phone down and pick up the box.

Back propped against the headboard, I check the books one by one.

The stories are captivating, drawing a vivid picture of a different world, filled with sensibility and emotion.

The stories are heartwarming and fresh and open your eyes to the beauty of this world, whether you're young, old, or in the middle.

My heart vibrates with every word as I read the Lost Girl. And then it jumps with joy as I read the Baby Bear. Children's laughter echoes in my ears as I imagine the fun a kid could have listening to that. And then my heart cries as I read the Glass Boy.

One particular paragraph catches my eye.

'I LOOK AROUND and see a land of magnificent beauty.

Rolling hills and snowcapped mountains, shimmering rivers snaking through the forest, and flowers hugging the edges of the land. Children playing under the trees and beautiful animals roaming and grazing freely.

It's all soaked in golden sunlight and wrapped in the whispering wind, yet all I feel is the cold glass stretching beneath my palms, holding me captive.

It's like a bad dream that has no end.'

AS I RE-READ the Baby Bear, a drawing captures my attention. It looks like something I have seen before. Or something similar, at least.

And then I remember.

The graphics look like Jaden's sketches, the ones he used to draw for Emma. I flip the book over and check the illustrator's name, getting nowhere fast.

The author is credited with designing the graphics and the cover.

I run a search on the internet, but other than the promotional materials scattered all over her social media and her website, I can't find anything personal.

Not even a picture.

I shove the books back into the box, set them on the nightstand, and pick up the phone.

"Hey. Are you home yet?" I ask.

His voice drifts from the speaker.

"I just got in. Everything okay?"

The concern lining his voice makes me smile.

"Yes, yes. Are you free tomorrow night?"

My voice is loaded with emotion.

"Sure. Do you want to go out?"

"Um... I actually had something else in mind."

"Yes?"

"Dinner at my place. I'll cook."

"Okay."

A smile threads through his voice.

"Be here at seven," I say and end the call.

My heart explodes in my chest as the heat of a blush spreads over my cheeks.

This feels like a journey back in time.



JADEN

THE TABLE IS SET on the patio with white linens, sparkling flatware, begonias, roses in a vase, and plates trimmed with golden lines.

“What’s the occasion?”

Smiling, she points at me.

“You.”

“Me?”

I grin, amused.

“Mm-hmm,” she says.

“These are for you, baby.”

I hand her the garnet roses. Her cheeks turn scarlet like the flowers.

“Thank you.”

She buries her nose in the flowers.

“They’re beautiful. And they smell so nice,” she says, excited and surprised.

“They’re supposed to, aren’t they?”

“They don’t always do. Where did you get them?”

“It’s a secret,” I say.

She chuckles.

“Sit,” she says, pointing to the table. “I’ll find a vase for them and be back in a moment.”

She spins away while I sink into a chair.

My gaze stays on her, taking a snapshot of her red dress and long hair. It almost touches her waist.

Swiftly, she vanishes inside the house, and I shift my eyes away, scanning the backyard.

Strings of lights dangle from the trees while lit candles sit on the table and the edge of the pool.

“Do you want a drink?” she asks.

“Sure,” I say, swiveling my head to her.

She slides the plates of food on the table.

“Mmm... That looks good.”

I flick my eyes up.

“I did it,” she says proudly.

She shifts to the side and brings a bottle of wine to the table.

“I’ll do it,” I say, tipping my chin and motioning to her to take a seat.

“You look lovely,” I murmur, handling the wine and pouring it into the glasses.

“So do you.”

“Are you blushing?”

“Mind your own business,” she says, unfolding a napkin and placing it on her lap.

I laugh.

Her lips curve into a grin.

“Don’t make me regret that I invited you over.”

“You won’t regret it, baby,” I say, handing her a glass of wine. “To us,” I say, raising my glass and locking her eyes.

She studies my eyes as we clink our glasses.

“To us,” she says softly before kissing me.

On my lips.

She pulls away slightly.

I look at her, surprised.

She brings her hand to my face and slowly brushes my lips with her thumb, her eyes following the motion before flicking up at me.

“Good to know that I can still take you by surprise,” she murmurs, beginning to pull away for good.

I cuff her wrist and keep her still.

Her fingers stay on my face as, and without a word, I wrap my hand around her neck and crush her lips.

She grabs my neck and threads her fingers through my hair while I nudge her lips apart.

She shudders, and I break the kiss.

Dazed, she touches my lips again.

“Let’s go inside,” I murmur.

“Okay,” she says, her eyes trained on my mouth.

“Not yet, huh?” I murmur.

“Yeah... Not yet,” she says in a trance.

Closing my fist in her hair, I angle her head and lock her lips again.

Our lips connect as our tongues entangle, and I feel tingles in my groin.

“We can stop, baby...” I say against her lip.

She slips her hand to my fly, and there’s my answer.

I thrust my tongue into her mouth, and she reacts to me.

Famished, rubbing my erection with a sense of urgency, and I’m convinced we can no longer take this part slowly.

She unbuckles my belt and undoes my fly, her fingers sliding straight over my bare skin.

“Senna...”

I palm her hand as she strokes my shaft, and she looks at me, mystified, her eyes hazy from her arousal.

“I don’t want to only fuck you...” I say.

Light gleams in her gaze.

“I want to stay,” I murmur.

“You’ll stay,” she says.



# S ENNA

HIS EYES SWIM WITH LUST, his lips hungry for me.

I never doubted his power over me, and now I get a feeling of my growing power over him.

I keep stroking him while he keeps loving my lips and slides his hand between my thighs.

He runs my skirt up, and my pulse spikes.

He breaks the kiss again.

“Don’t... Please come to me,” I murmur.

He plunges his tongue into my mouth, sucking the air out of my lungs before he pulls me up and rises to his feet, smoothly sweeping me off the ground.

Our lips stay locked as he carries me inside.

“Up. Let’s go up,” I say, my fingers running over his face.

We make it to the bedroom, where he lays me on the bed, pulls my panties down, and leaves my dress and high heels on.

My arms are open for him.

He barely has enough time to kick his shoes off, and I pull him to me.

“I can’t wait any longer,” I say.

“Me neither,” he rasps.

He slides my dress off and frees my breasts while I rip his shirt open, craving his chest.

His hands run over my thighs, the swell of my butt, and the wet trail between my legs.

“Jaden...” I say the moment he touches the tingling flesh between my thighs.

His breaths are heavy.

Expediently, I hook my fingers inside his waistband, lower his pants to his hips, and bring my fingers to his groin before wrapping my hand around his hard meat.

“That’s good,” he breathes into me, his eyes on me.

Head tilted back, I watch him with half-closed eyes, my chest moving up and down with ragged breaths.

I open my thighs for him.

He pulls away slightly, his eyes scanning every inch of my skin, every curve.

His hand pressed into my skin before tracing, trailing, and grabbing.

He narrows his stare, melted steel glinting between his lashes.

He is drunk on power, wild hunger warming up his blood.

“Take me any way you want...” I murmur.

He slides lower on the bed and pulls my pussy to his mouth.

My legs are draped over his shoulders while his tongue and lips caress my flesh. Waves of pleasure break through me when he licks my clit, my entrance, and starts fucking me with his tongue.

An explosive orgasm comes to me.

As I’m still shaking, relishing the shockwaves, he slides on top of me, grabs his cock, and fills me to the brim.

He stays there for a moment, his eyes closed, his chest rocking with clipped breaths, his hands running slowly over my butt while his erection twitches inside me.

He's not even moving, and my need for him only grows, my wetness dripping, my nipples getting hard against his chest.

I roll my hips, and he presses into me harder, keeping me still a little more. The pull inside me only tightens, and I bite my lip and lick it.

His eyes dip to my mouth, glinting with a knowing smile.

"You'd love to suck a cock right now..." he says, his words doing their magic.

I sink my nails into his arms while he pounds me to my high.

Later, he smoothly breaks away from me, sheds his pants, and straddles me again.

This time my chest.

I tilt my head.

"You didn't forget," he says.

"I never tried to."

A smile spreads across his face as he keeps stroking his hard-on. Rock hard, his shaft points up in the air, ready for my mouth.

Holding his gaze, I wrap my mouth around his girth and suck him hard. He's close. His fist clutches my hair as I move my head.

He didn't forget either.

He pulls my head back, disconnecting me from his erection, and I shoot my eyes up.

One hand in my hair, the other running the length of his erection, he looks down at me, dominant, yet not threatening.

He comes back to me.

I open my mouth and take him deep until he hits the back of my throat. He starts moving, the tension in his body escalating fast. Soon, he shoots his load, and I clean his shaft with my mouth.

He watches me in silence, a crooked smile tilting his lips as he softly nods.

“That’s my girl.”

He lies on his back when I slide on top of him. His arms lock around me, a mysterious smile claiming his eyes.

I grin just because he does.

He brushes a few locks away from my face, softly kisses my lips, and murmurs in my ear.

“You let me know when you’re ready for more...”

I pull up a little and study his eyes.

“Are you serious?” I ask.

He nods, his eyes gleaming.

“Yes.”

My smile fades.

“This will be a test. It will teach you how much I love you. And it will give you a lot of pleasure,” he says.

“You’re serious.”

“I sure am.”

I press my cheek into his chest, listening to the pounding of his heart.

His hand goes to my hair.

“You shouldn’t be afraid, baby.”

“Do I have a say in any of this?”

“You had a say... You opened the door to your heart and let me in. I love you as no one else could, and I will take care of you as no one else would. You’re the best woman I could ever have. I will mend your heart, and I will make you mine. And

in time, you'll fully understand why I had to leave, and you'll forgive me."



I FLICK MY EYES OPEN. This is not just any other morning. I reach behind me and touch a naked body.

"Lower."

His hoarse, nasal voice makes me warm. I move my hand lower and cuff his erection.

Shifting his body, he spoons me. He cups my pussy, his erection resting against my lower back, and curling his fingers, he slides them into me.

"Someone had a wet dream," he murmurs, his lips in my hair.

"There wasn't that much of a dream. I'm always wet when I'm around you."

"Sounds like a great foundation for a long-lasting relationship."

I chuckle.

He pulls his fingers out, slides his hard cock into me, and rocks his hips.

He kneads a breast before circling my clit, and pressing his lips against my shoulder.

"You're the best I've ever had," he murmurs.

I clutch his thigh, clenching around him.

"And the only one who gets off from words..."

"It's not only the words you say."

"Yeah... I've never seen someone craving it as much as you do... Having your mouth and pussy filled at the same time."

"No, no..." I say, shuddering in his arms.

And then he plunges into me, giving me the pleasure that I need.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” he says after a few moments, breathing heavily like me.

Later, we walk into the shower, and half an hour later, we pull some clothes on and stroll into the kitchen.

“I can’t believe you kept my clothes,” he says, glancing down at his sweatpants.

“I don’t know why I kept them.”

He gives me a lopsided smile.

“Don’t get cocky with me,” I say, wagging my finger at him.

He flicks his hand up and spins toward the fridge when a new tattoo catches my eye.

“New ink?”

He glances at me over his shoulder, his smile fading.

He stays silent, and then I remember. Every scar renders a new tattoo. I erase the space between us and study his ink.

“Is there a new scar?”

I trail my fingers across his shoulders, following the intricate design of a bird unfurling mythical wings over his back.

“I don’t feel anything,” I say, inspecting his skin.

“It’s not on my body,” he says, pulling away from me. “How do you like your eggs?” he asks, swiftly shifting the topic.

He opens a couple of cabinets and pulls out pots and pans.

“I can order something.”

“I don’t want to wait.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I want to make pancakes.”

“I don’t have any —”

“That’s fine. I’ll make them from scratch.”

He raids the refrigerator and the pantry and pulls out eggs, milk, fruits, whipped cream, maple syrup, and flour.

“We eat outside,” he says and motions to the backyard.

“Here. This is for you.”

He hands me a cup of black coffee.

“Go.”

He nudges me to move away.

Minutes later, he brings out the plates, and we eat.

“This is good,” I say.

“Thank you.”

“How can I love you back?” I ask.

He locks my eyes, surprised.

“Is this because of the pancakes?” he asks, amused.

“No. The pancakes are only part of the reason. It’s not only about them,” I say, smiling. “Seriously, now. How do you want me to love you back? You never told me. I know how to satisfy your body, but how do I love your heart?”

“Loyalty,” he says and gulps water from the bottle. “We are not that different...” he adds.

“You said I’d know exactly why you left. When did you know you had to leave?”

His eyes darken.

“Looking back, I probably knew it when we played house in that chalet. You gave me a taste of a different life. A life I had missed so much. I knew it wasn’t perfect, but it was more than anyone had offered me. I was falling hard for you, and I think you knew that. You thought you had things figured out for us. You hoped I’d play along. It would’ve never worked for us.”

He glances at me.

“I had to become my own man without you holding my hand and without me doubting myself my entire life. I credit you for picking me up off the streets, teaching me, and giving me that initial opportunity, but after that, it had to be all on me. I started to feel for you way before I left. I wanted to move fast and do what I was supposed to. Besides, I bore the responsibility of Sara and Emma, and I couldn’t mess with their lives. They depended on me, and I depended on you, and that made my life a nightmare.”

He pauses, and I feel my blood spasming in my wrists.

“All that time we spent together, I tried to keep you at arm’s length and not promise you anything or encourage you, but things were getting out of control, so I had to leave. I couldn’t tell you then what I’m telling you now, and I couldn’t ask you to wait for me. I was willing to risk everything instead of making you feel sorry for me or think of me as less of a man. That’s why I left. It wasn’t a choice at all. I had to take care of my family first, find my own way, and then come back to you. I want you to understand that it was not a real choice for me. You weren’t the last person on some list. You were right there with my family in my heart, but I wanted to be with you the right way.”

He goes quiet before he continues.

“I didn’t think you were gonna hate me, though.”

“I didn’t hate you.”

His lips curve into a bitter smile.

He softly nods.

“Yes, you did. Back then, when we met in that bathroom.”

“Okay... Yes, I did, but only because things had played differently in my head. I thought I was not enough for you, and you left because of that. I always knew you had a good side. It shined through in your love for Emma and Sara. But you didn’t let me get close to that side of you. At least not then. That’s why I felt used and abandoned.”

I stare blankly at the pool before looking back to him.



“And then I ran into you on that terrace. A new man. Well-off, laid back, laughing with a beautiful woman. It made me jealous. That’s where the hatred stemmed from, but I never truly hated you,” I murmur.

He keeps his eyes lowered.

“I didn’t,” I say, sliding my hand over his.

He raises his eyes.

“You have to believe me.”

“I do,” he says and smiles before giving me a soft kiss on my lips.

He smells like sugar and vanilla.

I run my tongue over my lip.

“You’re so sweet,” I say, grinning.

“I am, aren’t I?”

He pulls a folded napkin from a chair and runs it over his lips when one of the children books slides to the ground.

His gaze lands on the cover, a thought flitting through his eyes.

“Since when do you read children books?” he asks.

Flashing a mysterious smile, he picks it off the ground and sets it on the table.

“It’s a product review.”

“Hmm... And what do you think?”

I take the Baby Bear book in my hand and sift through the pages.

“They’re actually very good, and the illustrations are well drawn. They remind me of your drawings.”

His lips curve into a grin.

“Why are you so entertained?” I ask.

“No reason.”

“They do look like yours, don’t they?”

He nods.

“Yeah, they do. Because they’re mine.”

My mouth falls open.

“No. Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Have you sold the rights? I didn’t see your name anywhere.”

“No, I didn’t. My pen name is on the cover.”

I look at the book cover.

“What name?”

“Hope Evans. I’m the writer.”

“No.”

“Yes. I’m surprised you didn’t recognize the Lost Girl story. You inspired me.”

“Oh, my God. I can’t believe it. So... the name...”

“Hope Evans was my mom’s maiden name.”

“Jaden...” I murmur, suddenly grappling with emotion. “They are beautiful,” I say in a trembling voice. “Shit. Why am I getting so emotional?”

His lips curve into a knowing smile.

“You probably need to get laid... more?”

I ball up a napkin and throw it at him as we both start laughing.

# S ENNA

“NO SEX TOYS, PORNOGRAPHIC MATERIALS... RIGHT?”

“Jaden,” I say, admonishing him while flashing a smile to the catering people who pass by, holding trays of food above their heads.

The sunlight pours into Jaden’s eyes. Parting his lips, he gives me a playful smile.

“I just want to make sure...”

“You want to know for yourself. That’s what this is,” I say, pushing back a smile while shifting my eyes back to my tablet.

“No, it’s not,” he says, amused.

“The house is clean and children-friendly.”

“So there were some compromising materials,” he says.

“Shut up,” I say, chuckling.

Grinning, he holds his hands up and walks away.

He stops next to the food tables and coordinates the catering crew.

Occasionally, I glance up from my tablet and look at him.

He inspects the food, the playground, and the decorations.

He also checks his phone often.

This is not just any party. It was my idea to invite Sara and Emma, and I promised him that it would be a family-friendly event.

Adele, Mark, Nick, Abel, and Harper are expected to show up. The other guests are people I know through Adele, her husband, or people I work with.

Also, this is a daytime event. Some guests will bring their children, hence the playground and the toys waiting for them.

Early afternoon, the guests arrive.

It doesn't take long before the air fills with voices, children's laughter, and adult's dialogue.

Sara and Emma show up soon after.

Emma is shy with me and completely glued to Jaden. From the moment she walks into the backyard, she's either in his arms or asking for him.

Sara looks good.

Her hair is longer, and her features are more mature and beautiful. She wears a halter-style dress and a flower in her hair, making her look like a Hawaiian pin-up girl.

"Emma's okay," I say, trying to convince her to mingle with the guests so she can meet new people.

Before strolling back to Emma and Jaden, I introduce her to Adele's group.

I find them sitting on a lounge chair, Emma sprawled on Jaden's lap.

And as I watch them from afar, my insides melt.

She cuddles up to him and rests her head against his shoulder, glancing up from time to time to catch his gaze.

Softly, she kneads his arms, reminding me of a kitten.

He reads her a story, and she is mesmerized.

He raises his eyes and locks my gaze.

"I can read to her if you want to grab a bite," I say.

He talks her into letting go of him, and I replace him on the chair. The corners of her eyes point down as soon as he walks away.

“Don’t cry, Em. I’m coming back,” he says to her.

She barely pushes her tears back.

“I’ll be back,” he mouths to me while I wrap my arms around her, holding the book in front of us.

She casts a long gaze across the lawn where Jaden nears a table, still waving at her.

“You like him?” I ask, trying to distract her.

“Yes,” she says.

To prove it she grins and claps her hands.

“I like him too.”

She looks up and over her shoulder, giving me a curious stare. Smoothly her gaze shifts to my hair.

“You wanna touch it?”

She nods, smiling from ear to ear. I brush all my hair to the side and let her pull at my locks.

She smiles, entertained.

“You want me to continue the story?”

“Yes,” she says, playing with my hair.

We start our little reading session, and by the time Jaden comes back and takes a seat in a chair next to us, Emma’s eyes are glued to me, her fingers woven in my hair.

I feel Jaden’s stare, and it takes me an extra effort to remain focused on the story and not get distracted by him.

Every time I glance at him, his eyes glint with a soft smile.

“Are you okay?” I ask, trying to conceal my emotions.

He nods.

His eyes slip to Emma.

“Are you getting sleepy, baby bear?” he asks, his voice mellow like a lullaby.

Emma nods against my chest.

A warm grin creases his lips while his eyes sparkle, full of love for her. My mouth pulls slightly agape as I take in the tenderness flowing through his eyes.

“Time to take a nap then,” he says.

“Senna... nap...” she says, happily clapping her hands again.

He scoops her up from my arms and glances at me.

“Senna doesn’t take a nap... Not now, anyway,” he says, winking at me.

Blushing, I fidget, grappling with restlessness again.

Without adding anything else, he holds Emma against his chest and bends over, placing a feather-like kiss on my lips.

I melt into my chair.

“I think I may have the cure for your emotions,” he says, winking at me again, and my face gets even warmer.

They stroll away, and I finally begin to breathe.

Emma waves me goodbye while he keeps telling her something while nuzzling her face, making her laugh. She eventually locks eyes with him, and I may need a box of tissues.

What the fuck?

As the day recedes and the evening sets in, the lights begin to come on. A gasp falls from my lips as I spot Sara and Nick sitting at a small table for two.

I watch them interact for a few good minutes.

He’s talking— more than he usually does, and she’s laughing— a heartfelt, carefree laugh I’ve rarely seen on her.

He pushes to his feet, walks to the food table, picks up a plate of fruit and desserts, and walks back to her. She watches him as he pours wine into their glasses.

Oh, I know that look.

A smile brightens her face as soon as he starts talking again.

“Fuck...” I murmur.

“What?”

Jaden’s voice rings behind me, startling me.

He walks around and slides into a chair across from me.

“Is Emma okay?” I ask.

“Yeah... She’s asleep, and the babysitter is watching her.”

He glances at me as I gaze back to Nick and Sara. His eyes follow my gaze.

“What is it?”

I tip my chin in their direction.

“I think she likes him.”

I feel his stare on my face.

He laughs softly.

“Why is that a problem?”

I glance at him. Or rather glare at him.

He purses his lips, amused.

“Oh, shit. I forgot,” he says, pretending he has just remembered. “He was your charity project.”

A playful smile rolls over his lips, but I can’t taste his humor. Not at all.

“How was I supposed to know that they would get to know each other and like each other?” I ask.

He shakes his head, still chuckling.

“Stop doing this to me,” I say, grinning.

“What? I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are. You’re making fun of me.”

He bites his lip, his grin splashing over his face. He barely keeps his face straight.

“It’s a funny situation,” he says, and I have no other choice but to start laughing.

He shifts his gaze back to Sara and Nick. I follow his example.

“If there’s any comfort, you have good taste in men,” he says, motioning to Nick and then Abel, who curls his arm around Harper’s waist while she breathlessly drinks him in.

“Oh... I want to disappear right now,” I murmur, burying my face in my hands.

Jaden’s hand lands on my shoulder.

“The mistakes of the past catch up with you, don’t they?” he says, a smile threading through his voice.

“It’s not funny.”

“If anything, you can think about it this way. You’ve made a lot of people happy.”

I glance up at him.

His lips purse into a mischievous smile.

“Stop fucking with me,” I growl, and he starts chuckling.

A few moments pass before we both find ourselves watching Nick and Sara in silence. Sara slides her hand on top of Nick’s while he leans to her and places a soft kiss on her lips.

It’s an innocent kiss, and knowing him, it must have taken him a lot of courage to make that move.

“She likes him, doesn’t she?” I murmur.

“Yes.”

He looks at me.

“You get overly nervous for nothing. The past is the past,” he says.



“It’s not nothing. He likes her too. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have kissed her in public.”

“You really know how to pick these men...” he says seriously this time, still looking in the direction of their table.

“What do you mean?”

“He was not charity, baby. You liked him. He was different. Handsome and shy. You had the upper hand with him. Am I right?”

I can’t meet his eyes.

“I think I’m right. You preyed on him,” he says.

“I did not prey on him.”

“Is he a good man?” he asks, ignoring my comment.

“Yes, he is. A very good man. That’s why I didn’t want to mess with him. He seemed a bit lost.”

“Sometimes lost men make loyal lovers. In the hands of the right woman, of course,” he adds. “What kind of work does he do?”

“He’s an engineer, makes good money and has a house.”

“How come he’s single?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know. Women hit on him all the time, but he doesn’t take them seriously. That’s why I think he likes Sara. She’s different than the others, and I’ve never seen him so animated in the presence of a woman.”

“Hmm... A settler.”

I glance at him.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s interested in settling more than hunting. Did he like you?” he asks, curious.

“If he did, it must’ve been for a different reason.”

He tosses back his drink.

“He didn’t hit on you,” he says.

“Not really.”

“You probably scared the shit out of him, but not enough to turn him off.” He lets out a soft laugh. “So it was community service, after all.”

“You’re just...” I pause, searching for words.

“I know. I have a way with words,” he says. “On the bright side, you taught him a thing or two, and whoever wins his heart will benefit from that.”

I wait for his eyes to come back to me.

He looks at me; his gaze is bright with a smile.

“So you’re not angry that he’s talking to Sara?”

He shakes his head.

“Why would I be? She hasn’t been with a man since Jacob died, and she’s too young to live a life of celibacy. I don’t think it’s bad that she gets to know him. She wouldn’t spend time with him, let alone laugh and let him kiss her, had he been an idiot or a jerk. I’m pretty sure by now, he knows everything about Emma, the color of her favorite socks and the name of her animal toys,” he says, his eyes on Nick and Sara.

“How do you know all this?”

He flashes a cocky grin.

“It’s called survival, baby. That’s the first lesson you need to learn. Know people. Some are good, and some are bad, and you have to learn which is which, and pretty fast because it’s people who will fuck you up.”

A few moments pass.

“So... Are you a hunter or a settler?” I ask, smiling.

He tilts his head to the side, flashing a fiery grin.

“You already know what I am. The real question is... Are you a settler?”

S ENNA

MONTHS Later

“READY FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY PRESENT?”

His eyes rove over me.

I smile.

“Yes.”

“Your dress looks nice,” he murmurs, ignoring my remark.

He snakes his arm around my waist and pulls me into his chest.

He likes my dress a lot, judging by his hard-on pushing against his pants and stirring against my belly.

I run my hand down his length while he slips his fingers up my skirt and runs his palm up, sweeping over the high-thigh socks and garters and brushing over the sheer fabric between my legs.

I hold onto him while he pushes my panties to the side and slides two fingers into me.

“We were supposed to leave... It took me an hour to put myself together,” I say, pulsing around his touch.

Palming his hardness through his pants, I quickly shudder.

Panting, he tears away from me while I lean against the counter, my knees soft, my brow sweaty, and my panties lined with wetness.

Flashing a smile, he licks his fingers.

“You’re such a dirty man. I have to shower again,” I say, smiling.

“No, you don’t.”

He rides my skirt up and kneads my butt while I train my eyes on his mouth.

“I’m not gonna kiss you,” he says. “I don’t want to ruin your lipstick.”

“Now you’re concerned. After you ruined everything else.”

He shakes his head.

“I want you wet.”

“But we’re going out.”

“Exactly.”

He lowers his mouth to mine, so close my lips quiver in anticipation.

His soft breath fans over my lips.

“I can’t wait to fuck you tonight,” he says, adjusting his bulge.

He takes my hand.

“We need to go. We’re gonna be late.”

“And now, you’re hurrying, ” I say.

Flashing a playful smile, he pulls me toward the garage.

I run my hand over my skirt before climbing into his ride.

Later, he rolls his car out of the garage.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks, giving me a side-eyed gaze.

“Yes. I think so.”

“You think so?”

“I want to. You?” I ask.

“Yes.”

He veers toward the street, and the car quickly picks up speed.

“What if I said no?”

“We would’ve gone straight to my apartment and fuck.”

“No food?”

“I could find something for you to swallow,” he says, grinning.

Shaking my head, I glance out the window and push back a smile.

I roll down the window and inhale the fresh air.

I cross my legs, the pressure, and friction, throwing me into a pool of heat.

“So, who is this friend?” I ask, gazing at him.

His eyes stay on the road.

“He’s not a professional. He’s doing me a favor.”

“He must like you,” I murmur.

He nods. Slowly. A smile tugs at his lips.

“How did you meet him?”

“Through my first website. He had a similar site, doing the same kind of stuff. Teasing people, helping them to get off.”

“And?” I ask in a strained voice.

“We met and kind of hit it off...”

“Hmm.”

He laughs.

“Not in that sense. He was in college, and we talked about business more than anything else.”

“Right.”

“No, seriously...” he says.

His eyes twinkle with a smile, and I don't know what to think.

“Have you two met since then?”

“No. We spoke on the phone a couple of times. He graduated, found a job, and moved to New York. He called me again a few weeks back. He's back in town and has taken over his family business. He also got his pilot license.”

“What does he look like?”

“He looks good, and he wouldn't cross me.”

“Hmm...” I murmur, pursing my lips. “Speaking of crossing someone. Evelyne told me you fucked someone at Isabel's engagement party. That night... Remember? You left me tied to the bed for a few hours. You said you didn't fuck anyone, but one of her friends saw you leaving the woman's bungalow.”

He brings the car to a smooth stop near the restaurant.

He turns off the engine and locks my eyes.

“And you believed her?”

I shrug.

“I don't know what to believe. You were gone. Were you there...? Fucking her?”

“Would it matter to you after all this time? I was nobody to you back then.”

“I'm not so sure about that. And it would matter to me if you lied.”

He examines my eyes, not giving me an answer.

“You did,” I say, disappointed.

“No, I didn't,” he says curtly.

“Were you in her bungalow?”

“Yes, I was. She wanted me to fuck her and even offered me money.”

“Did she know you were hired?”

“No. She had no idea. She was all messed up because some jerk had broken up with her. She drank a lot, got fixated on me, and also got something mixed with the alcohol she had ingested. I went to check on her and ensure she was fine when I found her face down on the floor. I woke her up and helped her to throw up. It took an hour before she was able to go back to sleep. I didn’t plan to leave you on that bed for that long. And I wasn’t at her place to fuck her.”

I look at him, shaking my head.

“Where do you find these train wrecks?” I ask.

“Some of them, um... at Jill’s,” he says, winking at me.

“It’s not funny...”

He studies me in silence.

“Are we good?” he asks.

I shift in my seat.

“Yes, we’re good. The man we meet... What’s his name?”

“Kane.”

“What did you tell him about me?”

“That you’re my future wife.”

His words still echo in the air as he breaks his eyes away from mine and exits his car.

Mouth agape, I watch him walk around the car.

He opens the door on the passenger side and offers me his hand. I rise, my legs soft like butter.

He gives me a quick once-over.

“We can cancel everything,” he says seriously this time.

“No, I’m fine,” I say, spinning and heading to the door.



WE'RE EARLY.

The corner booth offers a panoramic view of the city and the room. Private and cozy, it seems like the perfect romantic spot.

We get our drinks and the evening unfolds as if he hasn't dropped that word on me.

He's been guarded since he said it to me. I wonder if he did, in fact, say it to Kane, or he was just testing me.

His phone screen lights up with a message, and something flutters in my chest.

As we wait for his friend, I run my eyes over the room.

Low lights spread a soft glow over the booths. Bouquets of white and purple lilac add a splash of color to the tables.

Soft piano music wafts through the air.

Couples share jokes and make small talk at the tables.

Young. Old. Women wearing elegant dresses. Men clad in suits and ties and starched shirts.

Furtively, I glance at Jaden.

What will happen to us in time?

The past flashes in front of my eyes. We've been through highs and lows, love and hate, regret and pain.

We've tested our bond through good and bad.

If we survive everything, would our lives turn boring and predictable after a while? Would he ever conform? Would I? Would our passion for each other die or thrive?

His eyes shift to the entrance as a tall, handsome man strides toward us. I swivel in my seat as Jaden makes the introductions.

My hand disappears in Kane's palm for a moment, and my gaze meets his eyes as he squeezes my fingers gently.



He takes a seat next to me.

The men exchange looks as I furtively study Kane. It takes only a few moments to realize why they like each other. Kane is a version of Jaden. Good looking, oozing sexual power, and just as adventurous, I imagine.

Bangs of dark-brown hair fall over his smoldering, dark-green eyes. His shirt stretches over his hard chest and broad shoulders.

He gives me a glance before connecting his gaze with Jaden's eyes. They share a smile, and my pulse spikes.

I grapple with a wave of heat.

Jaden slides his hand under the table and touches my thigh.

"Is everything okay?" he asks.

"Yes, everything is fine."

He searches my eyes. I give him a soft nod.

He cups my cheek with his free hand, giving me a soft kiss.

He lingers for a moment, his mouth locked with mine, his scent and warmth rolling over me as his fingers trace my thigh.

Pleasure shoots across my skin. Kane roves his gaze over us as Jaden gives me another kiss.

My insides turn to liquid pleasure.

Jaden's mouth slides over mine, and although briefly, he slips his tongue between my lips. A deep need surges through my center.

He smoothly pulls back as if nothing happened while I desperately run my hands over my dress, smoothing the hell out of it.

Discreetly, he adjusts his package.

The waiter, a talkative man, shows up and goes over our food options. Swiftly, he disperses the tension and, with it, the moment's magic.

We spend an hour eating dinner and making conversation, and we talk about business, travel, New York restaurants, and cars.

I learn that Kane has a good sense of humor and an unending zest for life. His fingers slide over mine a few times, demanding my attention.

We connect eyes and share smiles, and it feels as if we've been friends for a while when we leave.

We're flying at a cruising altitude an hour later, heading south. It's only the three of us, the moon and the starry night surrounding us.

We land around ten at night.

A yacht deposits us on a tropical island an hour later.

Lights are scattered across the land, outlining the path to a royally lit house.

I stall for a moment, taking in the beautiful view.

Palms sway in the breeze, and colorful flowers are everywhere.

"Jaden..." I murmur, looking at him.

I see my happiness reflected in his eyes.

"What is this?"

Mouth agape, I swing my eyes from one man to the other. Kane's eyes flash a grin.

Jaden loops his arm around my shoulders.

"This is my present for you, baby," he murmurs in my ear.

"An island?" I murmur, grappling with disbelief.

He nods.

"Yes. This is our future home."

We lock eyes, mine blurry with tears.

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

I stare at him for a few more seconds before I wind my arms around his neck.

“I love you with all my heart. I can’t wait to be yours,” I say, hugging him tightly.

“This is the best ‘yes’ I’ve ever heard,” Kane murmurs. “I definitely want someone like her,” he says, and we all start laughing.

# S ENNA

FALL, Wyoming

FILLED WITH JITTERS, I walk into the ballroom. The sight leaves me breathless the moment I step in.

Floral arrangements, candles, tables dressed in smooth linens, sparkling flatware, and vases fill my sight.

“Senna?”

I pivot, falling in Isabel’s arms.

“Wow,” I say, smoothly tearing away and running my eyes over the ballroom.

“You like it?”

“Everything looks fantastic. The place looks amazing.”

“I can give you the name of the company we’ve hired.”

I shoot a questioning look at her.

“What?” I mutter. “Who told you?”

“Adele. Was it a secret?”

“Yeah... Sort of.”

“Well. It was short-lived. Everybody knows.”

“Shit.”

The blood drains from my face.

“Why are you so nervous about it?”

“I’m not,” I murmur, although I am.

“I like Jaden,” she says sincerely. “And the word is, he’s made a lot of money.”

“Yeah... he has,” I say. “What did they say?”

“As long as he has money, mom doesn’t care, and dad? You know him. He plays along. Evelyne doesn’t matter. She commented, though, something about him being a ladies’ man. Nobody paid attention to her. She’s too snotty anyway. Nobody meets her expectations. Anyway. Is he coming?”

“Yeah, yeah... He should be here any minute.”

“Good. I can’t wait to get this started.”

“What?” I ask, distracted.

“The party, silly.”

She twirls away, and I get stuck, my feet glued to the floor.

Moments later, I pull out of my daze and saunter back, cruising along the largest corridor of the house.

It was Isabel’s idea to have the wedding reception in my parents’ home, and despite the trouble that usually comes with organizing such an event in someone’s home, they gave her the green light.

Staff fills the rooms—extra servers were hired especially for the occasion. I walk away from the crowd, heading to the study room.

The noise fades away as I push the door open and step inside. Thick logs burn in the fireplace.

I look around.

The place is the same, and up to this day, this is still my favorite room in the house.

I watch the fire, my mind sifting through childhood memories, when the door opens and closes behind me.

Startled, I spin around, and my eyes crash into his.

“What are you doing here?” I say.

He folds his arms across his chest and leans against the door, a slow smile spreading across his lips.

“I live here. Remember?”

His eyes size me up rapaciously, darkness flashing through his gaze.

This is so familiar to me and still makes my hair bristle.

The past comes to me fast, making me crumble, but I quickly recover and recollect myself, the new reality helping me to do just that.

I’m no longer an innocent girl. I’m a grown-up woman, and he holds no power over me.

I take a couple of steps toward the door.

He doesn’t show the slightest intention to move out of my way, his eyes drifting over me, brazenly undressing me.

Even now, after all these years, I can still read him and tell he’s ready to lunge at me.

He hasn’t changed. Which begs the question. How many more women has he secretly fucked in this house since?

I stop in front of him, gripping my hips.

“You’re not that stupid, are you?” I throw at him.

He cocks his head to the side and gives me a mischievous grin.

“We haven’t had the chance to be alone in a room for years. Didn’t you miss me?” he asks.

“No. Not a fucking bit. You must be delusional if you think it has ever crossed my mind.”

“Am I?”

He unfolds his arms and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“This is my parents’ home. Your wife is out there,” I say.

“It didn’t stop us before, did it?” he says, amused. “Who would believe you, anyway? They didn’t buy your story back when you were an angel. Why would they buy it now? Plus, you’ll get married soon.”

“So what?”

“You wouldn’t want him to know about us. Is he that fucking writer?”

“He’s none of your business.”

He smirks.

“You shouldn’t talk to me like that. You know it turns me on,” he says, brushing his pants and touching the ridge of his thick cock.

“You’re sick.”

“And so are you. I’ve never seen pussy coming around my cock as fast as yours, darling.”

He takes a step toward me.

I stiffen.

“Come on, for old times’ sake... You have no idea how many times I jerked off at the memory of your pussy stretched around my dick.”

He closes the gap between us, and I leap to the side just as he lunges at me. I escape his grasp, his nails scratching my skin, but he catches me as I try to swing the door open and dash outside.

He locks his arms around me and spins with me, shutting the door at the same time with a loud thud.

He slams me against the wall and collars my neck, his eyes smashing into mine, brutal and dark.

This is not a game.

He was never a game, and I was never in control of him.

He’s always controlled me. I know that nothing works with him, and my mind begins to scream, flooded with panic.

My back hits the wall, and his hand shoots up between my legs. I swing my arm, clench my fist, and clock him. Blood springs out from his broken lip. He stalls and stares at me, taken by surprise.

I push him away.

“Get off me, you fucking piece of shit. I’m not your fucking slut,” I bark and regret it quickly.

He charges at me again. Cuffing my neck and pressing his hard cock into me. He’s even worse when he’s turned on, and nothing does for him like my words.

“You fucking dirty slut. You know we are perfect for each other, and you get me hard every single fucking time. And you made me blast my load like no one else. You were nothing like my fucking wife.”

“You shouldn’t have picked her, you fucking asshole,” I growl and spit on him, pushing him back again.

His hand remains on my neck, pinning me against the wall.

He throws his head back and laughs, his expression morphing into something sinister.

“Do you really think most women are like you? You must know better than that.”

“Well, most men aren’t like you, asshole. Then why would women be like me?”

Tilting his head to the side, he runs his hand down his cock, flashing a knowing grin.

“Is he...? The man you marry?”

“Keep him out of this.”

“Mmm. He is. He’s a smart man to make you his, then. And a lucky bastard. It’s unfair for the rest of us who have to fuck wallflowers until our cocks turn to dust.”

“Well. Tough luck, jerk. He’s not like you.”

“I bet he isn’t, but he’s not a run-of-the-mill guy either. You wouldn’t have some shadow guy pussyfooting around



you. I know that much about you.”

“How would you know that, motherfucker?”

“I know you, Senna. It’s the way you’re wired, babe. You’d rather kill someone than fuck you into boredom, and that’s why you liked me even when you were a spotless angel.”

“Fuck you,” I snarl and clutch his arms, trying to tear his hands off.

He laughs again.

“Truth hurts, huh? I fucking made you good for him, you fucking slut,” he growls, no trace of a smile on his lips.

His voice turns into a hoarse grunt, his eyes glinting crazily while he grips my dress. I swing my knee high and crash it between his legs.

“Oh...” he mumbles, crouching in pain.

His hand slides off my neck. I dash away when his hand clutches my arm again, pulling me back.

The door cracks open, and a voice drifts through the air.

“Senna?”

“Jaden!”

The next second, the door blasts open, and Jaden’s eyes land on us. It takes him only a moment to understand, and darkness rolls over his face.

Fury. Anger.

He leaps forward, his fast jab crashing into the other man’s face, sending him over the table. He grabs him again and holds him up while putting his fist into his flesh again.

He lets him drop to the floor.

“Let him go,” I beg, panting, as I edge closer to them.

He straightens. His eyes flaring, his face burning, his fist bleeding.

“Who the fuck is this?” he motions to the semi-conscious body.

“That’s him. Evelyne’s husband.”



HE SLAMS the car door and shoves the key into the ignition, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“You could’ve fucking told me, Senna. For fuck’s sake, he was there a year ago at Isabel’s engagement party.”

His eyes blaze, dark.

“I couldn’t tell you. And it wouldn’t have made a fucking difference.”

“He’s part of your fucking family, and he could do that to anyone,” he says, exasperated.

“I already told them, and nobody believed me. When I told Mom, she said I was nuts, and when I went to Evelyne, she looked at me as if I was crazy. Up to this day, she still hates me for saying that. She said I had made things up because I was jealous of her. They both made up their minds and turned a deaf ear to me. They didn’t care about what I had to say. It was always his word against mine. I was an eighteen-year-old virgin, and he was an adult. Married to my older sister.”

“We’re not going back then.”

“We can’t leave, and I don’t want to ruin it for Isabel. It’s her wedding. And if we leave now, they’ll know something happened. If I tell them the truth, I’ll have to go through the same bullshit with them, and I’ll accomplish nothing.”

“Okay, then. We’ll stay at a hotel.”

“We can stay at the chalet. All my clothes are in the trunk.”

Without a word, he spins the car around.

We arrive at the cabin around noon. We buy food on our way over. The air is crisp, and the forest is white and buried beneath the snow, like then.

Sunlight filters through the trees.

Memories pour down on me as we walk into the house.

The caretaker hasn't removed the few things we left behind. A cigarette pack, Jaden's drawing pad, and a few books he bought at a vintage books store last year.

With the good comes the bad, and the memory of our last night together in this cabin flashes in front of my eyes, vivid as if it happened yesterday.

It makes something collapse inside me.

"I'll make coffee," I say, sneaking into the kitchen, evading his eyes.

I put the food in the refrigerator and lean against the counter, waiting for the coffee machine.

Moments later, he enters the room.

"You want some?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

I pour myself a cup of coffee, walk past him, and sit at the table.

He looks out the window before turning around and propping himself against the window sill, folding his arms across his chest.

He studies me.

Silent.

Sad.

My chin quivers as I look at the cup.

"Today was not a good day for me," I say and pause. "I knew I'd have to face this sooner or later. Him. The past. I often wondered what my life would've been had I not met this man. All these years, I felt guilty for creating a rift in my family and being the one revealing this man's secrets. I didn't want to be the one who told my sister that she had married a sociopath. As much as I didn't want to like what he did to me. But I did. I can't blame anyone other than myself. I know I

can't change the past, but sometimes I wonder if everything would've been different had I resisted him."

His eyes lose their spark.

"Some days, I just want to go away. Find a perfect spot..." I say, staring blankly at the window. "Have that invisible wall around me... to protect me—the one from my childhood story. A place where days and nights are equally beautiful, silence is soothing, and time drips in a perfect sequence of happiness."

I glance down at my hands.

"Sometimes I wish I were more like Sara."

He edges to the table and takes a seat.

He looks at me.

"What exactly are you saying?"

I glance at him, my eyes filled with tears.

"I wish I were that woman, Jaden... Someone who's not ashamed of her past. Someone kind and gentle. I have it in me. I know I do. It's that girl inside me who's everything I want to be. She's still with me, trailing along, but there isn't much for her to live off—I lost so much. But if I know anything about her, she's stubborn, and she'll never go away. "

A sad smile curls his lips.

"Sara didn't have an easy life. "

"I know..." I murmur. "But her heart has never been broken."

"Because I protected her."

I lower my eyes to let a few tears fall.

"I was her invisible wall, " he says. "And you already are the woman that you want to be. You were probably that woman even back then. You were the only one who looked at me differently when I was nothing but a paid fuck. Nobody thought much of me. Women treated me like meat, and men, even the lowest scum, showed me only disdain. I was nothing but a pretty face at the corner of the street, getting my dick

sucked for money. Remember, I didn't use to come inside Jill's. Those who worked there and knew what I was doing couldn't stay away from me far enough. They preferred to wipe the bar clean a few more times instead of shaking my hand."

I look at him, his beautiful eyes wrapped in soft, mournful light.

"I lost a lot too, Senna. I didn't want or choose to, but I did. I wish I could turn back time and find the young boy I used to be, talk to him, teach him not to fear, and make him strong enough to face life's crap. I can't. He's not gone, either. He's the one who talks to Emma, plays with her, and writes the children stories, and I'm pretty sure he's the one who loves you."

A smile creases his lips.

"He saw something in you and learned the secrets of your heart. And he was the one who wanted to make you his home," he says softly.

My chin begins to tremble as I wipe my tears away.

He scrapes his chair back, rises to his feet, and grabs my hand.

"Come... Let's make the best out of this day."

He kisses me gently, his hand framing my face.

I look at him.

"We're gonna have that home, Senna, and I'll be your wall, and you'll be heart. All right?"

I nod.

"But I don't want a wedding," I say.

He smiles.

"Me neither."

We spent the rest of the day inside the house.

The first part of the day fades into oblivion by the time the evening sets in. He runs a bath, and I cook dinner. We spent

the evening talking about his parents, Sara, as they were growing up and his friendship with Jacob.

We take a bath together before we move into the bedroom.

From a drawer, I pull out a stack of notebooks with stories I wrote as a teen right here, in this very house.

We sift through them. Some are sad, and some are funny. I plead with him to read for me.

He leans back against the headboard, picks one, and starts reading. I listen to him, mesmerized, the same way Emma does. Something beautiful sparkles in his eyes.

And he smiles as I drink him in.

He has Emma's eyes. Pure and filled with joy.

"I want your babies, Jaden," I murmur.

He shifts his gaze and locks my eyes, a loving grin rolling over his lips.

"I know," he says, sliding the notebook to the nightstand.

He turns to me and takes me in his arms.

"I want your babies, too," he murmurs in my ear.

"But you'll need to teach me how to be good to them," I say. His lips give me a soft, loving kiss.

"You know everything, Senna. Everything you need to know is right there in your heart," he says and kisses my lips and hair.

"We should start right now with this baby-making business," he grins. "Nine months is a long time."

We both laugh.

"A man with a plan," I murmur as he slides on top of me.

Moments later, he eases himself in while I wrap my legs around him.

S ENNA

JADEN'S HAND SLIDES LOWER, settling at the small of my back.

I look at him.

He studies me through his lashes, his head tilted, his eyebrow lifted.

“What is it, baby?”

“How come I ended up with the most handsome man in the room?”

He flashes a cocky smirk, glancing away for a moment, then lowers his head and whispers in my ear.

“You don't have to flatter me. Just say what you want.”

I grin.

“You know what I want,” I murmur as he pulls me to the dance floor.

He drapes his arms around me as we start to twirl. Moments later, his eyes fly over me, a shadow flitting through his gaze.

He brushes my cheek with his lips.

“He's here. Are you sure about this?” he asks.

My smile dies out.

“Yes,” I say in a strained voice.

I furtively check my phone and reread the message.

‘I KNOW about your future husband’s past, and I’ll keep my mouth shut if you meet me in the study room.’

“READY?” Jaden asks.

I nod.

He squeezes my shoulder, encouraging me to get going, and winks at me as I reluctantly let go of him.

We split before reaching our table. I glance at him one last time as I walk out of the room.

Surrounded by guests, he has his eyes on me. I give him another nod and spin away.

My heart pounds in my throat as I walk across the hallway. The door is cracked open. I run my hand over my evening gown, making sure the fabric falls smoothly over my body, and walk in.

“Close the door,” he says and turns to me.

The scraps and cuts are barely visible, but his lips are still swollen. I take a step toward him yet keep my distance.

“It turns out I was right,” he says, flashing an insolent smile. Clasp my hands on my hips, I push my chin up.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s not just any kind of man. I know you turned your back to your family, but choosing him will surely cut you out of their lives completely.”

I tilt my head to the side and shoot him a pointed look, guarding my eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He stretches a smile.



“Oh... But I think you do, honey. See, I’m not so surprised by your choice. After all, you’re nothing but a slut yourself, and you need a man like him to give you your fix, but they’ll never accept him.”

“You made me a slut, Lance.”

“Mmm... I fucking did, didn’t I?”

He shakes his head, smiling darkly as he relishes the memory. “To your credit, you screamed and fought me, but I knew it that very night when your untouched pussy swallowed my cock for the first time. I knew you were going to turn out just the way I wanted. None of the women who opened their legs for me, including your sister, were anything like you.”

He puts his glass of scotch on the desk and takes his tuxedo jacket off. “I fucking picked the wrong sister, but you were too young, and they wouldn’t have given you to me. I never liked Evelyne, but she was the obvious choice, and she was forced down my throat. Why do you think that, up to this day, I’d fuck anyone but her?”

“You didn’t love anyone, Lance.”

“That may be true, but sure as hell, I loved fucking you.”

He rounds the desk, and I barely suppress my impulse to flee. My hand slips to the edge of the desk. He nears me, his eyes boring into mine. Curious. Inquisitive. Questioning.

A soft chuckle lifts off his lips as his finger trails the contour of my collarbone and then slides down inside my cleavage, stopping between my breasts.

“It doesn’t have to be rough, Senna. I can be smooth, and I bet he is smooth as well. You and I can be what we once were, and nobody needs to know. You can have that husband of yours. This way, everybody will be happy.”

He tucks his finger under my chin and tips my face up. The other hand grabs mine and presses it on his erection.

“See... You still get me hard.”

He rolls my hand up and down, his cock twitching against my touch.

“What if I say no?”

“Your parents will find out the truth about him and you.”

I smile.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

He grins back at me, a shred of anger flashing through his smirk.

“No, it’s not. He was nothing but a street whore.”

I laugh, cold.

“How would you know that?”

“Well, the funny thing is I didn’t have to do anything to find out. The information has been handed to me.”

“Really?” I ask, tilting my head back and lifting an eyebrow while trying to move away from him.

“Uh-uh.”

He snakes his arm around me and keeps me in place, pressing his hardness into my abdomen.

“Women are a bit obsessed with him, and it happens that one of Evelyne’s friends got a little fixation on him at Isabel’s party. She hired someone to find out who he was. Accounts of him servicing random people on the streets came back to her.”

“I don’t believe a fucking thing.”

“There was a woman who left her husband because of him.”

“Had that friend shown you any proof?”

“The PI forwarded pictures of him with that woman.”

I huff.

“Doing what?”

“Leaving a motel room.”

“That’s it?”

He clasps my chin, and my smile falls from my lips.

“Listen... I don't need to see his dick in her cunt to know the truth.”

My eyes pull into a tight line.

“Who told you all this? And how come you just received this information?”

A dark smile creeps up his lips, giving me a hunch.

I grapple with disbelief.

“Oh my God... You're fucking this woman. She's one of Evelyne's friends. So-called friends. I bet you fucked her last night...” I say.

A smile glints in his eyes.

It all starts to connect in my head.

“Wait. You've been fucking her for a while. I know who she is. She almost overdosed because of you.”

He takes a small step back, breathing out a sardonic chuckle.

“That's because she was an idiot. She got a bit clingy for my taste, and I had to break up with her, but once she found someone else to be obsessed with, I had no problem servicing her.”

Bile rises to my mouth.

“You are so fucking disgusting,” I say, spilling hate into my words.

He comes fast toward me, but my hand is already up in the air. I slap him as hard as I can, shattering his balance, and with a couple of strides, I'm at the door, his footsteps right behind me.

The door slides open without me touching it, and I slip outside just as Jaden bursts in, his hand clutching Lance's neck.

“Not so fast, buddy,” he says, shoving him back into the room.

He bends Lance over the desk and presses his head against the surface.

“Got it?” he throws at me over his shoulder.

I lift my gown, snatch the small recording device, and stop the recording.

“Yup.”

“Fucking bitch,” Lance growls.

A thud follows his words as Jaden smacks Lance’s head against the table.

“She’s way past your dirty talking, motherfucker. So let’s keep it civil.”

“Go to hell you fucking jerk. You deserve that slut...”

Another thick thud puts Lance’s blood on Jade’s knuckles.

“This is how it will go down, Lance,” Jaden growls. “You file for divorce within the next three business days. You take Evelyne’s friend with you. If she stays behind or you fail to comply, this recording gets into Evelyne’s hands, her family and yours.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Lance grunts, his lip gushing blood.

Jaden hovers over Lance, his eyes darker than a winter night.

“Don’t push it, Lance. I’m really generous here. If you’re going now, you still have your medical career and a woman. If you stay, you’ll lose everything. And if you ever come close to Senna again, I’m gonna kill you with my bare hands,” he says through clenched teeth. “It’s your choice, dickhead.”

He finally straightens and releases Lance, who starts smoothing his clothes.

Jaden strides to the door, and just before he reaches me, he swivels his head back to Lance.

“And by the way, keep slandering me, and I’ll slap you with a suit. I know you have money, but so do I, so don’t fuck with me.”

He exits the room and wraps his arm around me, pulling the door shut behind us.

Smiling as if nothing has happened, he looks at me. “Are you ready to go home, baby?”

“Yes.”

He lowers his lips and kisses me. Soft and fragrant, warm and kind.

He’s the best man I could’ve loved.

The man who set me free.

## EPILOGUE

**S**ENNA

FOUR YEARS later

TURQUOISE WATER STRETCHES ALL around the island.

I can see it through the open doors.

The draperies flutter in the ocean breeze as the afternoon light filters through the palms and blooming shrubs.

“They’ll be here soon, baby,” I whisper, smiling against his bare chest.

“They’re not gonna find us.”

“Yes, they will,” I say, chuckling. “We have invited them.”

He rolls onto me, his eyes glinting with mischief.

“Oh, no...”

“Oh, yes...” he murmurs.

He flashes a smile as my hands roll down his back. Wetness drips between my legs.

“Open for me, baby...” he says quietly.

I part my legs.

He slides into me, filling me up.

“This feels good,” I murmur. “It always does.”

He crashes his lips onto mine and slips his tongue into my mouth.

“Mmm...” I moan. “You’re so fucking good,” I say between moans as he rolls his hips.

“No screaming, baby,” he says against my mouth.

I come in silence, my body breaking with pleasure beneath his frame. His eyes close for a moment, his body tensing as he pounds me till he comes undone.

“Fuck, yeah...”

He rolls to his back.

“Who likes to fuck at five o’clock in the afternoon?” I ask, still catching my breath.

He grins.

“People who have time and money and like to fuck.”

He cups his cock, rolls off the bed, and pushes to his feet. His naked body towers over me— long muscles covered in ink. I push to my elbow, indulging in the view.

“You look good...”

His eyes narrow with an amused smile.

“Mmm-hmm,” he murmurs and vanishes into the bathroom.

“Are you coming?” he asks, cracking the door open, his eyes glinting with a smile.

“We don’t have time for that, Jaden.”

He nods.

“I think we do if you get your ass off that bed.”

I push out of bed and rush to the bathroom. Warm water falls over us for a few minutes before he turns the shower off and presses his lips against mine.

“Come on, baby. I know you want it...” he purrs, and my knees turn soft.

Drawing a path of kisses on his chest and abs, I slide down to my knees.



“AN ISLAND, SENNA?”

Harper’s eyes sparkle in the sunset’s light.

“I told you when we moved down here.”

“You didn’t say it was an island estate.”

I turn my palms up.

“Well. I probably forgot.”

“Oh my God! It’s beautiful.”

Swiveling her head, she takes in the glimmering water, the sky bleeding red into the ocean, and the glow spreading over the palms, sand, pool, and terrace.

Abel edges to us, his eyes filled with an affectionate smile.

“Oh. Is he asleep?” I ask.

He pivots so I can see the little boy’s face. Milo gives me a glance and a shy smile before burying his face in his dad’s arm.

“We’re at that age,” Harper says, smiling, combing her fingers through his hair.

“He’ll come out of his shell,” I say.

As we saunter to the house, a chorus of voices resonates in the air.

Not much of a surprise, my daughter’s voice rises above everybody else’s. As we get closer, Jaden’s voice thunders, and silence fills the air.

“Sam?” I call her out.

“I didn’t do anything,” she says.

The four-year-old looks at me, her nose creasing with a smile, her blue-gray eyes twinkling with mischief.



“You’re lying.”

She turns her nose up and gives me a cheeky grin, reminding me of her father, her fair locks and eyes making her a carbon copy of him.

“She’s definitely your daughter,” I say, cutting my eyes at Jaden, who’s barely stifling his laughter.

“Daniel?” I call my son.

Her twin brother raises dark green eyes, glistening with tears. Brown bangs fall over his brow.

“What did she do?” I ask.

He doesn’t say anything, and I know him well enough not to expect him to rat out on his sister. No matter what she does to him, he never talks.

Samantha glues her hands to her hips and smiles. Suppressing my grin, I motion to Jaden. He scoops her up, and I snatch Daniel, and we all walk into the house. Sara and Nick enter the room from the other end of the terrace.

“How’s Jacob?” I ask, laying Daniel on the sofa.

“He’s asleep. Emma’s with him.”

“She doesn’t have to. Our nanny can watch him,” I say, walking toward the kitchen.

“Mommy?”

Daniel’s voice rings in the air— the first time I hear him talking this evening. I turn to him.

He looks at me with puppy eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere. Okay?”

He nods and flashes an adorable smile.

“And stay away from Sam.”

I sweep my gaze around, searching for my daughter.

Oh, God. She found Milo. All I can do right now is roll my eyes as she pokes at him while the little guy tries to hide in Abel’s arms.

A soft voice comes from behind.

Emma, a tall, slender eight-year-old, strolls into the room. She comes to me and hugs me, and then searches for Jaden. As soon as she spots him in the kitchen, her face brightens with a smile.

She saunters to him.

“Hey, sweetie,” Jaden says, burying her in his arms.

Her eyes fill with gleaming light.

Nick strolls into the kitchen as well. Emma tears away from Jaden’s arms and turns to Nick. She looks up at him, smiling again. His arm curls around her shoulders, and they both shift to Jaden. Emma tells them something, and they start laughing.

Jaden and Nick fix drinks. Soon, Abel joins them.

I keep an eye on everything as our staff sets the dinner table.

Later, we all sit around the table on the patio when a whirring noise drifts through the air.

“A helicopter?” Sara asks.

Jaden and I exchange looks as we push our chairs back and walk to the helipad.

“Are you expecting someone?” I ask.

He flashes a mysterious smile as a tall man climbs out of the helicopter.

I grin.

“Oh... Excuse me. Is that the only way he can travel?”

“He likes to pilot that thing.”

I throw my hands in the air.

“As long as it’s not you,” I say.

As Kane strides toward us, Jaden’s arm tightens around me.

They shake hands and give each other a quick hug, and then Kane slides his lips to my cheek and places a kiss.

“How come you’re alone?” Jaden asks.

Kane’s lips curve into a smile.

“She didn’t make it,” he says, somewhat amused.

“And you don’t seem affected at all,” Jaden says, studying his eyes.

Kane shakes his head.

“No... not really. We broke off the engagement.”

A moment of silence stretches between us.

Kane’s eyes express something different. Softer and melancholic.

“She’s not what I need, and we’ve both known it for a while.”

His eyes slant at me as he says that, and Jaden flashes a grin.

“She’s mine. Don’t even think about it. It’s enough that my son looks like you.”

“Jaden!” I blurt, my skin burning with a blush. “How can you say that?”

“I’m just teasing you, baby,” he says, and they both chuckle, amused.

“That’s not what I had in mind,” Kane says, his eyes flickering with a smile. “I think I found her... My girl, ” he says, flashing a mysterious grin.

“Really?” Jaden asks curiously.

“Yeah... She’s not mine... yet. She’s different than you, Senna, but she’s just as wild.”

“I’m not wild...”

The last word gets muffled as Jaden’s palm slips over my mouth. They smile at each other before he slides his hand off and kisses me.

Moments later, we all walk into the house.

Kane joins us at the dinner table.

Hours later, as noises die out and our guests get settled in their rooms, Jaden threads his fingers through mine and motions me to follow him out of the house.

Grains of sand roll beneath our bare feet as we walk to the ocean. We sit on the beach, my back glued to his chest, his arms locked around me.

In silence, we stare at the ocean, listening to the soft waves lapping against the shore. He kisses the top of my head, and I curl my arms around his thighs.

“It’s this what you dreamed of?” he asks, a smile lining his voice.

I tilt my head to the side to capture his eyes. Soft and tender, they’re waiting for me to give him an answer. I nod a few times.

“Is it for you?” I ask.

“Yeah... This is it, baby. It can’t get better than that. ”

His lips touch mine, soft, tender, and pure. Like his heart. Like mine.

*FLORIDA, November 2017*



THANK you for reading the last book of the Dark Heart Series. If you loved this Series, check out the rest of my books and don’t forget to sign-up for my newsletter to get updates on my work in progress as well as freebies.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shayne is a voracious reader and a prolific writer. She writes what she likes to read, and people who share her taste devour her books. Her love stories are layered, character-driven, have a dash of mystery, and a lot of depth. They feature hot-blooded men and adventurous, soulful women.

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