



DANGEROUS

Love

MINIK

DANGEROUS LOVE

MINK



Dangerous Love

MINK © 2023

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book only. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from MINK.

This book is a work of fiction. While reference may be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

CONTENTS

Dangerous Love

Hitman's Prey

Hitman's Prey

1. Lena
2. Heath
3. Lena
4. Heath
5. Lena
6. Heath
7. Lena
8. Heath
9. Lena
10. Heath
11. Lena
12. Heath
13. Lena
14. Heath
15. Lena

Epilogue I

Epilogue II

His Deadly Darling

His Deadly Darling

1. Luke
2. Cassandra
3. Luke
4. Cassandra
5. Luke
6. Cassandra
7. Luke
8. Cassandra
9. Luke
10. Cassandra
11. Luke

12. Cassandra

13. Luke

14. Cassandra

15. Luke

Epilogue

Loan Shark's Obsession

Loan Shark's Obsession

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Epilogue

Hitman's Heart

Hitman's Heart

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by MINK](#)

[About the Author](#)

DANGEROUS LOVE

A collection of MINK tales where the romance is dark, deadly, or dastardly. But love still exists, even when it's dangerous.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... for a contract killer.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Loan Shark's Obsession

He always collects on his bargains.

Hitman's Heart

He kills without remorse. Some say he doesn't have a heart. Turns out it's true ... until he meets *her*.

HITMAN'S PREY

HITMAN'S PREY

He's up to something. I know it. No man can be that handsome and mysterious. He's probably a spy. I can't say for sure, but I'm going to find out. Watching Heath is easy, but wanting him is the part that's going to get me into trouble.

Lena peeks from her windows and tries to catch me doing something, though I'm not sure what she thinks she'll see. What sort of an assassin would I be if my sweet neighbor figured me out so easily? Besides, I'm here to watch over her. The only problem is that she's irresistible and far more alluring than my work. Choosing between them may be the death of me, but Lena is more than worth it.

LENA

“*I* think I hear something,” I whisper into the phone as I try and peek out my bathroom window. Thinking maybe he has a visitor, I glance toward my neighbor’s driveway. He never has anyone over, but I could have sworn I heard multiple voices.

“That’s just me brushing my teeth,” Kimber mumbles into the phone, her mouth full of Crest and a toothbrush. Then I hear a spitting sound followed by water. I look over to my phone that’s propped on a shampoo bottle on top of my bathroom sink. Kimber’s face comes into view as she picks her own phone up. I don’t even know why we bother FaceTiming while we’re in the bathroom. One of us is always busy doing something and out of view. Yet we always do it. She smiles, holding up her toothbrush. “I’m adulting.”

“I’m adulting.” I glare over at her.

“Well, how about turning off the bathroom light so your next-door neighbor doesn’t see you, clear as day, peeking out to stalk him?”

I gasp at the thought and jump off the toilet to hit the light switch. But I stumble over my own feet and grab the towel hanging on the rack. The metal pulls free from the wall, causing me to lose my balance. I fall to the tile with the towel lying next to me. A second later the towel rack hits me in the face.

This is what I get for being a nosy neighbor.

“Ouch.” I reach up to touch my cheek, but I don’t feel any blood.

“That’s going to leave a mark,” Kimber says through laughter.

I roll over onto all fours. “Jeez.”

She can’t even see me right now, but I’m sure she knows what happened. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I mumble as I push up from the floor to look in the bathroom mirror. There’s a small scratch on my cheek. I roll my eyes at myself before flipping off the light.

“You think he heard that?” I ask, going to sit back on the toilet.

“Everyone heard that.”

“Whatever. The houses aren’t that close together.” I peek out the window. I can see him through a side window. He’s not looking this way, so I’m not busted. I’m way too clever to be caught, no matter what Kimber says. “He didn’t even notice.”

“Notice what? That you’re as graceful as a baby giraffe?”

I stick my tongue out at her, but I know she can’t see me now that I’ve turned my light off. She always says that giraffe bit because I’m all legs and part clutz. I’m used to it. It’s a good day if I don’t break anything or trip over myself. Honestly, it’s a small miracle I’ve made it this far in life. Though squatting in my dead grandmother’s house may not count as making it on my own. I never met her, but I’m not living the sort of life where I can turn down free accommodations.

“You got a concussion?” Kimber asks.

“No. I’m adulting in a far more adult-type fashion than you. I brushed *and* flossed.”

She makes a *pfft* sound. “You spend your days and nights stalking your new neighbor. Not sure that puts you into the adulting category.”

“Don’t get all snotty because you got into a fancy school in Paris.” I hate that school. It took Kimber away from me. Okay, so maybe it’s one of the best culinary schools in the world.

Fine. I try not to blame her for leaving me behind. Kimber and I have been tight since we were little. She should be here stalking with me, but she's a whole world away, truly living her best life. I'm here drifting. Most people have their path figured out by now, but I'm not most people. I spend my days taking a few online classes, though nothing has kept my attention. Maybe because my new neighbor has taken it all. I squint and stare across the driveway again, looking for his shadow on a curtain or his face in a window. I can't stop wondering what the heck is going on over at his house.

I should be focusing on my future, not playing amateur sleuth. But it's not like I don't do anything. Sometimes, I pick up extra hours at the local daycare whenever a staff member calls and they need extra help. It doesn't pay much, but I enjoy being around the babies. Kimber thinks I'm insane for working with them, but I actually enjoy it. They're cute and squishy and for some reason whenever I have one in my arms I'm not so clumsy. The money is just an extra. My deceased grandma was apparently a saver. Along with her house, she left me a little nest egg. So I'm not exactly under a lot of pressure to get a steadier job just yet. Her frugal habits are now enabling my stalking.

"What's he doing now?" Kimber asks.

I glance back to my phone to see Kimber is snuggled in bed. She acts like I'm the crazy one, but she's totally into this. She asks for stalker updates on the regular. Before she ditched me for Paris, neither of us could figure my neighbor out for the life of us. He comes and goes at all different hours and always seems to be going on these quick trips. It doesn't hurt that he's easy on the eyes too. I tell myself that I only watch him because of his suspicious activity, but deep down, I worry it's much more than that. The mystery only makes him more appealing.

I jump when I catch movement on his screened-in porch. "Ah ha! He's running."

Kimber sits up. "From what?" Her eyes have gone round with excitement.

“No. I mean he’s just running. Working out on his treadmill that has no sides to it. I don’t know how he doesn’t fall off.”

“Oh.” Disappointment clings to the one word as she falls back onto her bed. “You’d kill yourself on one of those. Rails or not.”

I nod in agreement.

She frowns. “Who runs just to run? Psychopaths, that’s who.”

“You think he’s crazy?” I whisper as if worried he can hear me.

“Never know.” She yawns. We sit in silence for a while, her drifting in and out of sleep, me staring until I get a small headache.

I can’t pull my eyes away from him. He’s been running for over thirty minutes now. Not at some moderate pace either. He is full-out running like he is chasing after someone. I don’t know how he’s keeping up the pace but he does. He doesn’t look winded in the least. His long, thick legs stride easily. The man is built like a brick house, which can’t make running any easier.

I can never get a read on him. His short dark hair and the way he carries himself make me think he’s in the military, but he often dresses in fancy (okay, yes, *sexy*) suits. Other times he’s in plain black slacks and a button-down shirt. His face is always cleanshaven and serious. Except that one time when Mrs. Winsten caught him at the mailbox—then he was all smiles and shared a few words with the mean old lady. Why does he talk to her?

“Still running?” Kimber opens one eye.

“Yeah. Crazy.”

“Yeah, he’s crazy. Crazy hot.”

I force a frown and throw my phone.

“I’m teasing!” she shouts with a laugh. She can’t even see me, but she knows I’m being pissy.

“I am a stalker,” I admit. *I* am the crazy one. The crazy jealous stalker. Not my neighbor. I never should have sent Kimber those pictures I snuck of him when he was checking his mail. It took me forever to get them to begin with. I don’t get many opportunities, because the man doesn’t stand still. His erratic hours have me doing my best just to catch a glimpse of him. I only leave when necessary because I don’t want to miss something good. He makes stalking him really hard. I wish he would get on a regular schedule to make this easier for me. Is that too much to ask?

“You should bite the bullet and go introduce yourself already.” Now she’s the crazy one. I can’t do that. I know myself, I’d probably get nervous and say something stupid like *Are you a hitman or a spy for the CIA?*

“You can talk to anyone. Believe in yourself.” She adds a note of worry that I don’t like.

“I talk to people, okay?”

“You talk to babies and toddlers for a few hours, then lock yourself away in that house.”

I sigh, well aware of my weird quirks. “Don’t scold me.”

“Not scolding.” She gentles her tone. “Just reminding you that you got this, all right?”

Chatting with Kimber is easy for me. I could even go places with her. Places where there are other people. One time, I even contemplated going to a movie with her! (No, I didn’t go. Too many people. Yick.) People are scary, especially if they’re in a group. Kimber is different for me somehow. She sets off a side of me that I’ve rarely shown to anyone else. Hell, I’d walked right up to her that first day of kindergarten and declared us best friends. That’s pretty much unheard of for someone like me. But I guess true friends don’t hold back. True friends help you overcome your fears.

So, yeah, I can talk to Kimber, but this situation is completely different. I don’t just go and talk to strangers. The idea makes my skin go all crawly. But the creepiness goes away when I think about the man next door. My fascination with him has

turned into this weird crush, and I've made up these little stories about him in my mind. I spend far too much time fantasizing about the different lives I think he leads. If I told Kimber all the things I imagine, she'd probably fly back here and escort me to a padded room.

I scream when something brushes against my leg, then jump, almost busting my ass on the tile again.

"What is it?" Kimber sits up.

"A huge, hairy spider!" I scurry to the door and flip on the light. "Fangs and venom!"

"It's Jinx," Kimber says in a monotone as light floods the bathroom. "Not a tarantula."

I look down at my cat as he winds around the toilet. I inherited him with the house. He doesn't like me, and I'm pretty sure he scares me on purpose. I put my hand over my racing heart.

I pick up my phone. "That cat hates me!"

Kimber fights a laugh. "Yeah, pretty much."

He's such a weird animal. He wants to be around me, but I'm not allowed to pet or touch him. If I try, he usually gives me the dirtiest look before trotting off.

"He probably just got your ass all busted again," Kimber says and snuggles back into her pillow.

"I didn't fall this time." I raise my chin smugly.

"I meant by Mr. Hotness next door."

My head jerks toward the window. My eyes lock with his. He's staring right at me.

I think he smirks, but I drop to the ground. I try not to cry out as my knees hit the hard tile.

"That's gonna leave a mark too." I close my eyes. Embarrassment turns my cheeks pink. At least only Kimber can see me now. Jinx meows at me before running off.

"Oh, honey." Kimber shakes her head, an amused, if sleepy, smile on her face. "Go to bed."

“Fine.” I crawl over toward the light before reaching up and flicking it off. I get to my feet. He can’t see me in the dark. And even if he could, I’m already busted.

“You’re not going to bed, are you?” She yawns. “You’re just switching windows.”

“Ahh-” I trail off because I’ve got no excuse, and I’m a terrible liar.

“That’s my girl. Ain’t no quitters here.”

I giggle because she’s right. I’m going to find out what he’s up to. I just need to get better at my stalking. *Investigating*, I mentally correct. Totally not stalking. I’m just keeping an eye on him. Like the neighborhood watch. That’s what I am doing. It’s for the greater good, and not because I’m nosy as shit. It’s also not because my mystery man is too handsome for anyone’s good.

HEATH

She's watching me from her living room now. Probably hunkered down in that blue and white afghan that rests on the back of the chintz sofa with its threadbare edges. Mildred always did take the harmless granny routine to the extreme. But her granddaughter doesn't know what she was. I'm one of the few who does.

I sit back in my recliner and watch her watching me. Slipping on my night vision goggles, I get a good view of her. She's wearing the oversized T-shirt with the kittens on the front. Where did she even get that? A thrift store located in 1986? Just seeing it makes me smile. Fuck, I'm going soft.

She scans the side of my house, doing her best to find me. I love teasing her by showing up in a window and pretending to be ignoring her and just going about my life. She thinks she's so sneaky, ducking down when I glance her way or pretending to be reading a book or watering her half-dead garden. She doesn't have much of a green thumb. But that's fine. I don't watch her to learn horticulture. I'm more partial to when she bends over to fuss at one of the wilted tomato plants. Her long legs and round ass are an excellent view that goes perfectly with my morning coffee.

Jinx jumps onto the back of the couch and curls up right in Lena's face, obscuring my view. I shake my head. That cat has been nothing but trouble since the day he showed up on Mildred's doorstep. Lena reaches out to pet him, then pulls back, then tries again. Jinx goes to bite her—total head fake—then runs off. Asshole.

I focus my night vision goggles tighter on her face, the little dimples on her cheeks hidden when she's not smiling. But I've seen them. Sometimes, she smiles in her sleep.

My phone vibrates. I sigh. No rest for the wicked. I shed my goggles and pick it up, checking the number. Work. Always work.

I stand and stretch as Sister Jezebel gives me the details of where, when, and who. At least it's in town. I can come back to my little bungalow and watch over Mildred's granddaughter when I'm finished with the job.

Dressing quickly, I holster my pistol and slide knives into all the hidden spots in my suit coat and pants. My tailor doesn't skimp on quality, not when he knows the only way he gets repeat business is if I'm alive to give it. I check myself in the mirror and adjust my tie. This job should be quick and easy. Not painless, though. Never that.

I trot out to my garage and choose the sleek black Mercedes. I don't roll it out unless it's nighttime. The flashy car doesn't go with the cottages on this street, and I can't afford to draw any attention to myself.

Even though the engine is nothing more than a low purr, I can feel Lena's gaze on me as I ease down the driveway and out onto our cookie cutter cul de sac.

The city is miles away, but I'll get there in plenty of time. So I flick on the radio and drum my fingers on the steering wheel. My thoughts go back to sweet little Lena, the way she rests one hand just above her right breast when she sleeps. The flowery pink panties she likes to wear. It's a shame when her air conditioning just happens to go out—odd, really, for it to have so many problems—I smirk. But when it's on the fritz, she sleeps on top of the sheets, her kitten T-shirts riding up and her panties on display. How many times have I wanted to rip them off and take her? I can't count. But I would never hurt her like that. Not because I'm a good man. I'm not. But because I respected Mildred. She trusted me, helped me when no one else would, and I'll owe her a debt for the rest of my life.

My gaze flicks to my rear view. A periwinkle blue Camry follows me, though Lena tries to keep a reasonable distance between us. The little sneak has stepped up her efforts.

I smile and run my thumb across my lower lip. If she wants to play this game, I'll oblige her. I'm not even out of our small town before I pull over at a gas station, jump out of my car, and head inside. I pretend to be putting heavy thought into whether I want a Red Bull or a Monster drink when the bell tinkles behind me. I don't have to turn around to know it's her. This is a big move on her part. She rarely leaves her house. So I let it play out. No need to spook her.

"Merle." I greet the cashier and hand over the Red Bull.

"How's it going?" He rings me up, and I pay with cash as Lena peeks over the honeybun display.

"So far, so good."

He hands me my change. "You look like a man on a mission."

"Things to do." I shrug and take the Red Bull, then turn around slowly so she can duck before I head out the door.

"Take it easy, man," Merle calls.

I hold my hand up in a wave and leave. Once I'm back in my car, I start it up and keep her in my peripheral vision as I pull out.

I can't help but grin when I see her in my rearview. She can really move when she wants to. Dashing across the parking lot, she almost trips, barely catches herself, and finally jumps into her little Camry to follow me.

"Oh, sweetheart." I laugh as she keeps that same distance. I suppose she thinks it's safe. But there's a reason I've never introduced myself or gone over to visit my neighbor. With me, nothing's safe.

I speed onto the interstate, and she follows. She isn't giving up this time. She's tried this before, but she never makes it to the on-ramp. Tonight, though, she's committed. I let her follow me and go a normal speed to make it easy for her. She keeps up, though she signals with every lane change and even when she

just *thinks* of changing lanes, but doesn't actually do it. Does she have any idea how fucking adorable she is?

I signal far in advance of the next exit, then turn off onto one of the dark downtown streets. She edges up behind me at a red light, her eyes doing their damndest to see through my midnight tint. I turn and go a few blocks before parking on the street in front of Our Lady of Sorrows.

A faint drizzle falls, chilling the air and slicking the road, but she doesn't seem bothered. She pulls in a few spots back and turns off her lights. Hunching down in the driver's seat, she watches me with those big green eyes. I check my weapons once more before getting out and taking the stairs two at a time into the church.

The late Mass drones around me as I slide into one of the back pews. Attendance is sparse. A few widows here and there along with some older men, most of them bent with age and piety.

The door squeaks open behind me and she steps timidly inside.

Now she has to make a decision. She can either sit across the aisle from me or in front of me, but she can't sit behind me. So it's either be seen or slink away into the night. The priest is already looking at her, his gaze sharp. Knowing her, she won't want to be stared at, especially not like that.

I can hear her take a deep breath as she sits primly in the pew to my right. Her scent floats around me. It's the lotion she wears. She has particular favorites according to the season. They're arranged neatly on her vanity in the northwest corner of her bedroom. The one she's wearing now is Marshmallow Pumpkin Spice, and I have to say it's one of my favorites.

She still wears the cute kitten T-shirt, and I wonder if there's a bra underneath. One quick look tells me that no, there isn't, and yes, she's cold. I adjust my hardening cock and drape one arm over the back of the pew.

I can feel her eyes on me. She does her best to pretend she's listening to Father Elliot, but she hasn't heard a single word

from his mouth. Instead, her brow has been wrinkled as she tries to figure me out.

I rise when the priest requires. She gets to her feet, too, her head bowed as he finishes the prayers and makes the sign of the cross.

The parishioners fill the aisle, some of them using walkers as they make their way to the front to light a candle.

She doesn't move.

Neither do I.

Eventually, Father Elliot has shaken everyone's hand and strides down the aisle to greet me. "Heath. So good to have you in my flock this evening."

"Thanks, Father." I give him a respectful nod.

"Come to volunteer for preparing the lunches for tomorrow?"

"Of course."

He smiles, his wizened face and watery blue eyes showing his age. "Then come along to the kitchen. Maryanne and Linda are already hard at work with Father Levi overseeing. They could use a man like you to help with the heavy lifting."

I pat him on the elbow as I exit my pew.

Lena's mouth is wide open as I make my way toward the pulpit, then head right and pass through a door to the classrooms, kitchen, and gathering hall. I pause at one of the stained glass windows and peer through Saint Peter's heavenly aura as she slinks out into the night. She gives one more look at the church, then walks to her car. Once she's safely inside and driving away, I pull a blade from my sleeve but keep it tucked away.

"Maryanne." I smile as I enter the kitchen, and the elderly nun waves me over and gives me a hug. With one arm, I return it.

"So good to see you, young man."

"Where's Father Levi?" I look down at her.

“You’ve come?” Her eyes widen as she stares at me. Can she see death in my eyes? She clutches my arm. “You’re here for him? Finally?” She clasps her hands together and whispers a prayer. “I was hoping it was you.”

I put a finger to my lips. The Taletti family is many things—killers, drug dealers, thieves—but when there’s a wolf in their midst, particularly one that preys on children, they hire a man like me to take care of it. I’ve been volunteering at the church for the past few months, gathering evidence and getting to know my mark. I only just turned in my dossier on him this morning. I suppose Maurice Taletti had heard enough from the nuns, seen enough from my report, and decided it was time.

Usually, a bullet in the back of the head is the safest, quickest way to dispose of a man. But this one? The one who thought he could hurt children in the house of God? No. I’m going to do him slow.

Linda, the other nun, points me toward the large walk-in pantry and makes the sign of the cross as I pass. She knows, just as Father Elliot knows, that I’m here for one reason. It’s not to prepare lunches for the shut-ins. It’s to deliver justice.

Father Levi stands at the back of the pantry, then grabs two loaves of bread and turns to leave. I close the door behind me and pull my knife free.

He drops the bread, realization dawning in his eyes almost instantly. Guilt. That’s what that sudden intake of breath and haze of fear means.

He holds up a hand to ward me off. “I’m a man of God. You can’t—”

“Maurice Taletti has revoked your position at Our Lady of Sorrows.” I step toward him as his chin begins to tremble. I will grant him no mercy. After all, he never gave his victims any.

When I grab him by the throat with my free hand, his piss hits the floor in a steady trickle, followed shortly by his blood.

LENA

I close my eyes tightly. It's too much to take. I can't bear it. I spit out all the sour Sweetarts into the kitchen sink.

"Ha! I knew you couldn't hold ten in your mouth. The record is mine!" Kimber lets out an evil laugh as she dances around her tiny dorm room.

"You're mean." I pout.

How could anyone hold ten sour Sweetarts in their mouth for sixty seconds?

"You know I had a rough night. You could've let me win." I turn on the water and bend down to the faucet to try and wash the sourness out of my mouth. My hair hangs into the water, causing the ends to get wet. I try and jerk back before too much of my hair gets soaked, which causes water to go up my nose. I let out a choked sound. I close my eyes because there is nothing worse than water going up your nose.

"Shit. You okay?" Kimber has stopped dancing around to check on me.

She picks up another Sweetart and pops it into her mouth.

"I'm okay." I grab the kitchen cloth to wipe my face.

"That's good, because you might have had a rough night but you haven't filled me in."

I pick up my phone and peek out my window. I don't see any lights on. I'm not sure if he's home or not. Probably still

feeding the homeless or maybe helping orphaned children.

“There’s nothing to fill in. It was lame.” I walk into the living room and plop down.

“Is it lame because you got busted, eh?”

“No! I totally played it cool.” It was close. I was sure I was a moment away from being busted, but he didn’t notice me. I should be happy about that, but I’d be a liar if I don’t admit that I wanted him to notice me a little, even if I was playing spy. But no, he didn’t even look at me. Not once.

I scrape my tongue with my teeth. “He volunteers at a church. A *church*, Kimber. He preps meals for the elderly.” Maybe I’m wrong about him. But I don’t *feel* wrong. He sure as heck doesn’t look as though he’s a man that follows the Ten Commandments. The whole church thing has only heightened my curiosity. “It has to be a front for something,” I say, already concocting my own story of why he was at that church.

“You’re never going to be satisfied, are you?” Kimber laughs. “Maybe he’s running a huge drug operation out of the church basement! You should have checked the Bibles. I bet they were hollowed out and stuffed with kilos of cocaine,” she says while I nod along.

“You think so?” This would make more sense. The late night outings, nice suits and fancy cars are all a part of the drug ring he runs. That has to be it. “Yeah, I think you’re on to something. The church is just a smokescreen. There’s a covert operation. He probably calls it ‘Crack for Christ’ or something.”

Kimber rolls her eyes at me. “Doubtful, but you’re not going to be satisfied until you figure it out. What if this dude is living a normal life? One where he works nights, pays his taxes, and maybe believes in God so he goes to church.” I can feel the exasperation in her voice. I simply shrug, because there is no way he’s straight-laced.

“Well, how about he could be an undercover FBI agent that’s staking out the church?” I say it in one long breath before

Kimber can interrupt me.

She shakes her head. “You’re too far gone. There’s no hope for you.”

We both start laughing, because it’s true.

“Really though. What if the church is a front for something?” I know I’m reaching but I don’t want this to be over. I was just starting to have fun.

“You’re missing the most important point of your story. You got in your car and followed him to the church, then went *inside* the church?” Kimber smiles. “He might be up to no good, but I think he’s doing you some good.”

She might be right. I bite my lip. I’m always so nervous about venturing out of the house, but I did it. That’s how far gone I am. I’ve jumped into the deep end just to figure him out. I drove way past my normal safe zone around my house. I also stopped at a roadside convenience store and went into the church, a place where a group of people gather. That, in itself, is a huge deal for me. I try never to go anywhere with lots of people. It makes me nervous. I don’t know why, but it’s a quirk I’ve always had.

“I haven’t seen him since.” I pout and glance out the sunny window at his too-neat house. His absence has tanked my mood. Which is stupid. I shouldn’t care if he’s home or not, especially since I’ve got him pegged as a possible-serial-killer-maybe-FBI-agent-definitely-up-to-no-good guy.

Kimber must’ve noticed something was up when she called. It’s why she’d dropped a Sweetart challenge on me. We do these random, odd competitions with each other. It’s something silly that we started when she moved a world away from me. It is our little way of having a girls’ night.

“Hey.” She snaps her fingers. “Go knock on his door.”

I sit up. “Have you lost your mind?”

“You lost the challenge,” she reminds me.

I groan. “No, I don’t even know what I’d say to him.”

“Say you need sugar.”

“I have sugar.”

“Okay, a cup of milk.” Kimber lets out a long sigh. “It doesn’t matter. You’re missing the point. Maybe you’ll see inside his house and find the bodies.”

“I’m a terrible liar,” I remind her.

“Go into the kitchen and dump all the milk down the sink. Then it’s not a lie.”

“You’re so smart. Cruel, but smart.” I stand, heading for the kitchen again. “This is why you got into your fancy school, and I’m here with a cat that hates me and stalking the man who lives next door.”

“We all need hobbies.” Of course my best friend finds a reason for my behavior to be okay.

I open the fridge, grab the milk, and dump it out. Jinx jumps up onto the counter to watch me. I thought he’d given me dirty looks before, but this one is lethal. What kind of cat did my grandma leave me? He’s a sneaky little thing too. I thought he was supposed to be an inside cat, but I always see him outside. When I try to lure him back in, he usually runs from me. Then I give up and head back inside to find him not even ten minutes later, snoozing on the sofa. I have no idea how he is getting in and out of this house.

“I dumped the milk, but I’m not sure I can go knock on the guy’s door.” I look over at his place. I can’t tell if any lights are on since it’s sunny, but it seems like maybe he’s not home? I swear Jinx shakes his head at me for wasting the milk.

“Get to it, sis.” Kimber taps her wrist like she’s wearing a watch. “You lost the challenge.”

I close my eyes and groan. Whoever loses a challenge has to do something of the winner’s choosing. I should have seen this coming. Kimber set the trap, and I Sweetarted my way right into it. I take a deep breath in, stick my tongue out at Kimber, and disconnect her.

I pause at my door, realizing maybe I should change first. I bolt into my bedroom and look through my clothes. For the

first time, I realize I own a lot of tie dye and shirts with kittens on them.

“This why you’re always so grumpy with me? Because I’m always sporting other cats?” I ask Jinx as he watches me from my bed. For a cat that doesn’t like me, he’s always following me around.

I go with yoga pants. Aren’t men always saying women’s butts look good in them? I check the mirror, sticking my butt out to have a look for myself. I almost fall over in the process. These pants will do. I pull off the current kitten shirt I’m rocking and dig for a simple plain undershirt that I normally wear for layers. It’s got a built-in bra so instead of normal, I look like I’m about to go for a workout. Dang it. I have nothing to wear.

Wait, if I’m supposed to be cooking, he wouldn’t expect me to be all dressed up. This *is* what I’d be wearing. I fluff my hair before putting on some lip gloss and mascara. I normally never wear the stuff, but Kimber is always telling me to try it. I head for the kitchen and find an apron and tie it around my waist. I find some flour in the pantry and flick it on myself. If I’m going to be sneaky, I may as well make this look legit.

I dig through the kitchen cabinets until I find a measuring cup. “I can do this,” I tell myself as I head for the front door. I’m only confident because I’m pretty sure he’s not home anyway. I can do my challenge, then tell Kimber to stick it.

I walk down my sidewalk, not cutting through my yard because it still needs to be mowed. As always, mystery man’s lawn is perfectly kept. I stride up his front walk and onto his porch. It’s big out here, exposed, but there aren’t any people. Just a black car down the block, but I can’t see if anyone is inside because of the window tint. It doesn’t matter. There’s no crowd around me, I remind myself. I’m okay.

I take a deep breath, then lift my hand to knock. Before I can make contact it swings open, and a hand reaches out and grabs me. I let out a small yelp as I’m pulled inside the home and the door closes behind me. The glass in my hand slips. I cringe, expecting to hear it shatter, but no sound comes.

“Lights on.” His deep voice rumbles, and I wonder if he can feel the goosebumps break out on my skin under his touch. My stupid nipples tighten, and I want to smack myself for not putting on a bra. This undershirt isn’t going to hide anything. When the lights click on, I look down at him. One of his hands is still on my arm. He’s on one knee in front of me, and his other hand holds the cup a few inches from the floor. He caught it. Even in the dark.

Yep. He is definitely a spy. I knew it!

Wait. We’d gone with drug dealer, too. Crap. This is either really bad or really good. I try not to acknowledge that his chest is bare. That he’s only in sweats that ride low on his waist. He must have been sleeping.

“Baking,” I blurt out. “I’m baking things. I need milk.” And a straightjacket. He likely needs a restraining order against me. We both stand silent for a moment while we stare at one another. He finally rises. I have to drop my head all the way back to look up at him. He’s handsome and dangerous all at the same time. I hope I live to tell Kimber about this.

HEATH

“**S**orry about that.” I release her, though I don’t want to. She backs to the door.

“Don’t be scared.” I hold out a hand, palm up. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Then why did you grab me?” She crosses her arms over her chest, highlighting her round breasts and hard nipples.

I keep my eyes on her face. The real reason I grabbed her? That black sedan down the block has been watching my house for hours. Her standing on my porch will only draw their attention in the wrong direction. Her direction, to be exact. I may not know who it is, but in my line of work, I can safely assume it’s not a friend. But instead of all that, I say, “It’s just getting a little chilly out there today is all. Fall. I wanted to be neighborly, have you in here where it’s warm.” The warmth doesn’t seem to calm her hard nipples, and I lick my lips.

“Oh.” She narrows her green eyes. “Okay, I guess?” She thinks for a second, then adds, “My friend Kimber knows I’m here. So ... so, you know.” Her hand goes to her hips. “She knows. I’ll be missed.”

“Missed?” I try to keep my smirk hidden but don’t manage it.

“Yeah, if you are thinking of—” She gulps.

“Of?” I shouldn’t tease her, but she’s so naïve and sweet in her little apron that I can’t help myself. “What would I be thinking of?” I could give her very specific details of what I’ve been

thinking of doing to her, but I assume those words are better left for the bedroom.

“Of like, of keeping me busy for too long. That’s all.” She presses her lips together and reaches for the door knob. “Well, this was fun. I have to get back home.”

“So you came for baking supplies?” I give her rainbow apron a pointed look, then hand her the measuring cup she dropped.

“Oh, um.” She glances at the cup, then peers around at my living room. “Normal,” she says under her breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Flour,” she says louder. “Err, I mean milk. I’m out of milk and I’m in the middle of baking, so I wondered if you had any?” Her cheeks redden as she says the words too fast.

“Sure.” I back up and gesture toward the kitchen. “Come on in.”

“In there?” She doesn’t move.

“Well, I used to keep all my baking goods in the living room, but then I got ants, so ...” I turn and walk past the granite bar and into the kitchen.

She follows timidly, her eyes scanning every nook and cranny of my home. “You can talk to your lights.”

“Hmm?” I open the fridge and pull out a carton of milk. “Oh, yeah. Saves on energy. Good for the environment.”

She runs her finger along the smooth granite counter. “This is nice.”

“Thanks. I had it redone when I moved in.” I steal a glance out the window. The car is still there. Fuck. I have to do something before she walks out the door, because whoever’s in that car will have no qualms about hurting her to get to me. I’m glad she came over. So fucking glad. But now she’s in danger.

Thinking quickly, I open the carton and sniff, then make a disgusted face.

“What? Spoiled?” She sets the cup on the counter.

“Yeah, it’s bad.” I toss the perfectly good milk into the garbage.

“Well, thanks anyway.” She frowns and grabs her cup.

“But I have another fridge in the garage with some extra stuff in it.”

She peers out the window, her eyebrows drawing together.

“You want me to go into your dark garage with you?”

“No.” I pat the counter. “Have a seat, and I’ll be right back.”

“Oh.” Her brow smooths, and she hops up on one of my barstools. “I guess that’s okay.”

“Sure thing.” I smile as she continues casing my home. She won’t find anything amiss, but I won’t tell her that and ruin the fun.

“Just a minute. Don’t move.” I dash out the back door and jog to my garage. Once inside, the door clicks and locks behind me. With the push of a button the hidden door in the floor opens, and I hurry down the stairs. The long underground compartment lights, and my vast array of weapons greets me with all the warmth steel can muster. I’m in a hurry, and it’s daylight out, so I choose a small caliber pistol. I check the action, cock it, then climb up to the garage and close the compartment.

Heading outside, I creep around Mildred’s—well, now Lena’s—Cape Cod with the pink shutters, then dart to one of the oaks that lines our quiet street. Peeking out, I stare into the windshield. A familiar bald head glints in the sun.

“Pedro.” I swear under my breath. He’s been gunning for me ever since I took the Hotchkiss contract right out from under him. Governor Hotchkiss’s death was all over the front pages for months. I got the cash and the acclaim. All Pedro got was mad. And now he’s looking to get even. Killing my own kind isn’t something I enjoy, but he’s overstepped, and now he’s seen Lena.

He’s turned around, his eyes focused on my house. I hunch low and dart across the street, then duck beside his front tire. Too preoccupied with spying on my house, he didn’t see me.

A fool's mistake. But that's what Pedro is, a fool. He's not a professional. In fact, he kills for sport. This isn't a job to him. It's fun. Maybe I should've put him down a long time ago.

I rise hard and fast, then fire two quiet shots. The loudest sound is the glass shattering. He's already dead as I open his door, yank him up, and shove him into the passenger seat. I jump in the car, his legs still on my side, then drive into the cul de sac and around to the alley. I park it behind my garage, drag the body to the back and throw it in the trunk, leaving my gun in the console. I'll finish cleanup later.

For now, I check to make sure no one saw. Once I'm certain the coast is clear, I run next door to Betty's house. Betty Winsten is as mean as they come, but she's always had a soft spot for me. Probably because I helped her husband get out of the life so many years ago. Her backdoor is unlocked—I'll have to have a chat with her about that—so I hurry in, grab her milk carton, run back out, then slow myself down as I cross my backyard.

Opening the door, I find Lena bending over and inspecting the pots and pans in my cabinet. Her ass. Fuck me, her ass in those yoga pants is too much to bear. And I swear I can make out the shape of—No. I need to look elsewhere, because my cock is already starting to act up, and all I have on are these sweatpants.

“Got it.”

She jumps, slams the cabinet, and scurries around to her seat. “Sorry. I thought I heard a ... mouse?” She's an awful liar.

I'm just glad she's on the other side of the bar and can't see the situation tenting my sweats. “Here you go.” I hand her the half-empty carton.

“Wow, that was fast.”

I shrug. “The garage is just right there.” I hitch a thumb over my shoulder. “How much do you need?” I point to the measuring cup.

“Oh, ah.” She yanks on a few strands of her red hair. “Just, you know, a cup.”

“All right.” I pour it for her. “What are you baking?”

Her cheeks turn even redder somehow. “Pie. You know, a pie.”

“I love to bake.” I slide the carton away and lean on the bar, bringing me closer to her.

“You bake?” Her gaze travels down my chest, then lower. “*You?*”

“Yeah. I find it relaxing.” I shrug. “What sort of pie are you making?”

“It’s a, well, it’s one of those...” She bites her lip, panic setting in as she tugs at her hair again. She truly is the shittiest liar I’ve ever met.

I throw her a bone. “Fall is a great time for pumpkin. Love those. My favorite is butternut squash pie. Have you ever made that?”

“Um, yes, that’s what I’m making today.” She grabs the cup, almost spilling some of the milk. “Right. So I’ll just be going.”

“I’ll walk you out.” I follow her, doing my best not to stalk. I’ve been told I can be somewhat ... intimidating. Even when I’m not trying to be. Occupational hazard, I suppose.

“Okay, this was great. Very nice to meet you, Mr. um, Mr...”

“My name’s Heath.” I hold out one hand, notice a blood spatter on the back, then pull it away. “Sorry, we don’t need to be formal, right? We’re neighbors. What’s your name?”

“Lena.”

“Lena, that’s a nice name.”

“Thanks. I like Heath, too.” She smiles. My heart seems to trip, fall, then struggle to get going again. She’s gorgeous and oddly wholesome to be related to a firebreather like Mildred.

I open the door for her, but scan the street before letting her step out. The quiet lane is once again peaceful and safe, so I step onto the porch and smile as she heads down my front walk.

She almost makes it to her yard when she trips, her hands splaying out, and the milk goes flying. I just manage to catch her around the waist before she hits the driveway, but the milk is done for.

Pulling her back up to rights, I set her on her feet.

She turns to face me, her hands on my bare chest, her eyes wide, her body warm. “Sorry. I’m such a clutz.”

“Don’t sweat it.” I use my finger to swipe some stray auburn hair from her forehead.

Her lips part when I do it, and I have the powerful urge to kiss her.

“I have an idea.” I look down at her, her freckles showing in the bright sun. “How about I get dressed and come over in a couple hours?”

“Come over?”

“I’ll bring all the supplies we need to make your pie, all right?”

“Come over to my *house*?” She steps back, though her hands linger on me for a split second longer.

“Sorry about that.” I adopt an ‘aww, shucks’ expression. “Didn’t mean to invite myself for dinner.” *I sure as hell did.* “Just thought we could get to know each other better since we’ve been neighbors for a while.”

Jinx trots out from a bush beside my house, a bird in his mouth.

“Dinner?” She narrows her eyes. “So we can talk about our lives. And you can tell me *all* about you?”

“Sounds like a plan.” I smile, then lean down to pet Jinx as he winds around my ankles. “How you doing, Jinx?”

He shows me his bird with nothing short of total pride. I scratch behind his ears. “Good boy.”

Lena harrumphs. “He lets you pet him? This bird murderer right here? He just lets you—oh my God. He’s *just letting you*

pet him!” Then she puts her hands on her hips and gives me a hard look. “Wait a minute. How did you know his name?”

LENA

“*J*inx and I go way back.” Heath smiles at me.

“Did you teach him to murder birds?” I raise an eyebrow at him. I knew the cat had a mean streak in him, I just didn’t know he was out murdering in broad daylight. This has been going on right under my nose. I need to figure out how he’s getting in and out so that no more birds come to any harm. Unless that’s the bird that’s been waking me up every morning at the crack of dawn. Hmm. That might not be such a bad thing. A girl does need her beauty sleep and all. Maybe if the birds were flying in to make my bed and help clean my house like they do for Cinderella, I would care more. But no, my house is a mess, no thanks to you, feathered friends. At least the kitchen will look its part and make Heath think I was trying to cook.

“Pretty sure Mildred schooled him in the ways of birdicide.” His tone is teasing, I think.

“Wait. You knew my grandma?” My hands drop from my hips. Of course he did. He’s always nice to all the older people on the block. It’s only me that he seems to avoid.

Heath puts his hand on my back, guiding me toward my porch. Is it possible that maybe I’ve been the one avoiding him? Well, sure, I *am* spying on him, which would probably make it hard for someone to introduce themselves to you. I’m always hiding, and it’s clear after last night that my spy skills are top notch. That I’m able to get around without being noticed. Now that I think about it, I’m not sure that’s a good thing. How

come people don't notice me? I let out a sigh. I don't even enjoy being around people, so I'm not sure why I even care. It's only my insecurities getting the best of me. Anyway, I have more important things to focus on. Including the handsome man patiently waiting on me as I have all these nonsense thoughts.

I reach for the door and pull it open.

"No lock?" The teasing tone is now gone from his voice. His face looks more stern than it did a few seconds ago. His jaw does this tick that is oddly sexy.

"I didn't expect to be pulled into your house," I snip, defending myself as I enter into the living room. "I thought I'd just grab the milk and go."

He frowns. "I'll go collect supplies and be back in a little while." Pointing to the door, he says in a stern daddy tone, "Lock it until I get back."

With that, he turns and hurries across to his house, his broad back soaking up the sun and making my mouth water. How much does this guy work out?

I lock the door, and I could swear he was hesitating on his walkway just to hear it click, then he continues into his place. Leaning against the door, I look around at my messy living room—the piled-up laundry, the empty pizza box, the used Korean beauty masks. "God, I need to get to work."

Jinx jumps up on the back of the sofa and starts grooming his whiskers.

"I know, you little murderer. You don't have to rub it in." I want to throw a pillow at him. "I'm cleaning, okay?" I snatch the pizza box and the paper plates.



Heath knocks on the door right at dusk. I do a quick scan of the room to make sure everything looks legit. I hid all the pictures of him I'd printed out, so that's a win.

When I open the door, I take him in. All of him. Tall, built, dark hair, sparkling blue eyes, and he's wearing a button-down with jeans that fit just right. He's got two paper grocery bags, one in each arm. His shirt fits snug on his biceps. Holy hotness.

"This place hasn't changed much." Heath's eyes travel around the room as the door closes behind him. He puts the bags down on the entry table and turns the lock. The sound is loud as it clicks into place.

"I didn't know if I should do much to, you know, change it." I admit. "I didn't know her, and I thought maybe living in her space as-is might make me learn more about her?" I only found out she was alive when a lawyer showed up and said she was ... well, dead. One day I was worried about being homeless and the next, I had a dead grandma, a house, and a cat. It was a blessing. Not the dead grandma part, but everything else. Kimber was moving across the world, and I was going to be left in a small apartment I couldn't afford. It doesn't help that Kimber was my lifeline to getting things from outside of my safe zone. This whole change of circumstances has been a whirlwind and almost a little too good to be true. Even though I have stability now, I have more questions than anything else. Who was my grandma? All the neighbors I've talked to said they didn't know her well, and it's not as though I could ask my parents. Maybe the one neighbor I assumed didn't know her at all actually knew her the best.

He smiles. "I don't think Mildred would mind if you made it your own."

"So you really knew her?" I turn to look at him. "Will you tell me about her?"

"She traveled a lot." He shrugs.

"Like you?" I know he's always in and out.

His eyebrows lower ominously. "Are you watching me, Lena?"

“No,” I say way too quickly, making him smile. Okay, I might have busted myself on that one. “I just don’t see you around much so I figured you must be traveling.” I stroll off toward the kitchen, trying to hide my face that I know is turning red at almost being caught. *Get it together, Lena. You’re a way better spy than this. He has no idea this is an interrogation, not a dinner date.*

“Consulting work. It calls for a good bit of travel,” he says from behind me and brings the grocery bags with him.

“Consulting?” I ask. When I turn, I almost run right into him. I didn’t know he’d followed after me so closely. He is creepy fast for a man of his size and quiet as a cat. Maybe that’s why Jinx likes him so much.

“I’m a fixer of sorts.” He puts the bags on the counter and moves even closer to me. He smells good, sort of like expensive mixed with clean.

“A fixer?” I scrunch my nose. “Like a handyman?”

“Problem solver?” he tries again.

Yeah, he’s totally a spy. Why didn’t he come up with something cool like a pilot?

“Problem solver, huh? Can you fix my dishwasher?” I raise my chin.

“What’s wrong with it?” He steps toward it.

“Nothing.” My shoulders drop. It was a test. One I wasn’t prepared to give, apparently.

“I can see why you’re out of milk.” His eyes are on my sink where I’d left the milk container. There is still milk spattered from when I poured it out.

“I dropped it. I’m clumsy.” Now that is only a partial lie, so it comes out easier. I should try sticking with half-truths. That might make me a better liar. “Was my grandma?”

Heath throws back his head and laughs. The sound is rich and tickles my skin, reminding me of my nipple problem from before. I spent so much time trying to make the place presentable that I didn’t even change. Crossing my arms over

my chest as nonchalantly as I can, I try to hide them. I should toss a tie-dye kitten shirt on over it, but I find I don't want to leave, even if it's only to go to my room to slip on a top.

"Mildred was far from clumsy. She was sharp as a tack," he finally answers.

That little revelation makes me wonder about my parents. I know she was from my father's side. That's really the only information I'd gotten on her. A father that was never involved in my life. It was always Mom and me until Kimber came along. When my friend and I had gotten a place together, Mom all but up and left. I'm pretty sure she felt as though I was Kimber's problem from then on. She never did handle my issues well, but I'm better about them now. I don't have meltdowns and lock myself in a closet like I did when I was a kid. I used to panic about having to go somewhere new. I learned to deal the best I could on my own and with Kimber. Sounds like my grandma was my opposite.

"Travels and sharp as a tack," I repeat. "Guess I didn't get any of those genes," I mumble as I turn toward my pantry. What did I say I was making? Butternut squash? I don't even know what that is. I grab a can of peanuts from the pantry. Again, when I turn, I run right into Heath. I know the man is big but the kitchen isn't that small. He's getting in my space on purpose.

"You don't want to be like your grandmother, Lena." His voice is soft. "I think you're fine just the way you are."

My heart flutters. That's so sweet. I stare up into his dark gaze. His eyes lock with mine. Oh God. Is he going to kiss me? Wait— isn't that what people do when they invite them in for coffee? This isn't coffee, though, it's dinner. It's not even that, we're supposed to be making a nut pie. All of my thoughts are starting to get jumbled, and I can't remember, especially now with his eyes on my mouth. He starts to lean forward, and I close my eyes, praying for the best because I'm not sure what to do. No one has ever tried to kiss me before.

My eyes fly open when I feel him move. He's on his knees again, cleaning up the can of peanuts that slipped out of my

hand. I dropped it on purpose to test out his spy moves, obviously ... Fine, I'm lying. I'm just nervous and clumsy.

"For the pie," I rush to say, trying to pretend I didn't think we were about to kiss. "Let me get the butter?" I turn to the fridge and pull it open. I stand there, but I'm not looking for the butter, I'm trying to calm my nerves and regain my composure. This is why I don't venture out into unknown waters. I stay away from groups and new people for these reasons. I get nervous. My attraction to him isn't helping the situation either. I need to get myself together.

"Butter?" he asks from behind me. I swear I can hear the smile in his voice. Can you even hear a smile? I don't know. I can't think straight with him this close to me. When it comes to Heath, I'm always inventing new things, so we'll add that I can hear him smile to that.

"For the pie. Butternut squash." I'm guessing there is butter in it. I mean it's in the freaking name. The biggest problem that I'm facing is, where am I going to get a squash? Isn't that one of those weird looking vegetables in the produce aisle? I should sneak to the bathroom and call Kimber. This is not part of the original plan to get a cup of milk. How the hell did I wind up with him in my house and making a pie out of some unknown nut? I turn to tell him that I'll be right back, but again he's right there. This time I really run into him. My chest meets his. I gasp because the cold from the refrigerator has not helped the nipple problem. My whole body flushes at his nearness. Desire slips down my spine and right between my thighs. A small ache forms that I've never felt before.

His mouth is half smirk, half smile. "You don't know how to make butternut squash pie, do you?"

I shake my head, because when I opened my mouth no words came out.

"It's fine, Lena. We'll do dinner first." He reaches up, brushing my hair off my shoulder. "I'm sure there is something sweet I can find to eat around here when we're done." He leans down. My breath freezes. Is this it? The kiss? But he doesn't move. He only stares. In the movies the other person is supposed to

lean in, I think. I wait a few seconds but nothing happens. His insinuating words about finding something sweet to eat keep replaying in my head. It's not helping the ache between my legs. I think he was talking about me. Well, that's not very churchy of him.

My phone starts to ring, and I scream from the surprise. My hand flies over my mouth. "Sorry," I say as I push past him, running to find my phone. I see Kimber's name lighting up on the screen. I hit decline and send it to voicemail. It begins ringing again, and I know if I don't answer she'll get worried.

I hit the green button. "Hey, I'm fine. I'll call you back later. I have company." I rush all of that out, trying to cut her off before she says anything embarrassing.

"Holy crap! Is he at your house? Are you okay?" Kimber says, obviously not getting the point.

"I know I said I'd call you when I got back home, but my neighbor came over unexpectedly and we are going to have dinner." I swear I hear Kimber smile too. I hang up on her when she begins hysterically laughing.

"Everything okay?" Heath says from behind me.

"All good." I look expectantly at the grocery bags. "Let's eat so we can get to the dessert. That's my favorite part."

"Mine too," he replies, but this time he graces me with a full smile.

HEATH

I'm not trying to come on too strong. But damn, when she talks about dessert and prances around in those tight little yoga pants, what's a man supposed to do? I'm not made of stone.

Clearing my throat, I back off and grab the nearest grocery bag. "First thing we need to do is either boil or roast the butternut squash." I pull the flesh-colored, gourd-like vegetables from the bag.

"I can boil things." She chews her lip as she stares at the admittedly odd squash.

"Great. Get a big pot going, and I'll cut these up. We can have the pie baking while we make dinner."

"You're a planner." She bends over to get a pot.

I pray to Saint Julian, the patron saint of all hitmen, for strength, because she is testing me. Turning to my work, I find a cutting board next to the stove.

"Do you ever cook?" I look at the spotless burners.

"I cook." She starts filling the pot. "You know, occasionally."

"Right." I smile as I look in the silverware drawer and grab a knife.

"You know your way around this kitchen pretty well." She's watching me over her shoulder.

"Lucky guess." I slice the ends from the squash, then cut it into large chunks.

“You also know your way around knives.” She sets the pot on the stove and walks up beside me. “You did that so fast, and all the pieces are the same size.”

I shrug and dump them into the pot, then turn the burner on. “Just been cooking for a long time.”

“Mm-hmm.” She doesn’t sound convinced.

“We boil those for about half an hour. Then they’ll be nice and tender so we can make a puree from them. After that, we mix in eggs, sugar, and flour, and we have the filling. All we have left to do is make the pie crust.”

“Whoa.” She twirls a lock of her red hair around her finger. “That sounds like a lot.”

“Not really.” I wipe my hands on the kitchen towel with the smiley cat on it. “Baking takes my mind off things. It’s very specific on how much of this, how much of that, what temperature things need to be. I like that.”

“You like instructions?”

“I like certainty.” I pull out a mixing bowl and grab the flour from my bag.

“Oh, I have flour!” She bends over again and digs under the counter.

I almost groan at the outline of her ass in those pants, but I don’t. I simply take the flour when she offers it and measure it into the bowl. “I’ll need a cup of cold milk and half a stick of butter.”

“Got it.” She rummages in my bags and pulls those things out, then grabs a plastic measuring cup. Holding it up, she says, “Unbreakable. Totally safe.”

“Good idea.” I use a big spoon to start mixing the dough. “You stir, and I’ll add ingredients.”

“Bossy.” She shimmies next to me and grabs the spoon.

I notice she didn’t say she didn’t like me being bossy. Good. Because this is just the beginning. I’ve been giving her space for the past few months, letting her get settled into this new

life that Mildred gave her. But that doesn't mean I haven't wanted her. I promised Mildred I'd watch out for Lena, and that's what I've been doing. But I've also been going a little above and beyond. Visiting her granddaughter while she sleeps probably isn't something Mildred would have instructed me to do. But I do it, all the same. Little Lena thinks she's been stalking me, but if she only knew how closely I've kept tabs on her ...

“So I just stir?”

“Just stir.” I measure out the butter and chop it into small pieces.

She stops stirring and watches. “How do you *do* that?”

“What?”

“That.” She does a chop motion with her hand.

“Like this.” I hand her the knife and scoot her in front of me so I'm caging her with my arms. I keep my hips back and try not to think about ripping a hole in her tight little yoga pants to stick my tongue through.

“This won't end well.” She tenses. “I'm so clumsy. One of us is going to lose a finger, and I'm kind of hoping it's you since this was your idea.”

I laugh. Mildred would have loved this little pistol. “You can do this.” I wrap my hand around hers as she holds the knife's hilt. Her skin is warm and soft, and the scent of her lotion sends heat through my veins.

“Now,” I say it in her ear and watch as goosebumps erupt along her shoulder, “carefully slice through the butter just like this.” I guide her hand.

She puts her other hand onto the board to help steady the butter, but she doesn't curl her fingers away from the blade.

I grab her wrist and pull it behind her back.

“Hey!” She turns her head to protest, putting her mouth so close to mine. Her gaze goes to my lips, and she licks her own. “Why'd you do that?” Her voice is breathy.

“If you can’t chop without curling the fingers on your off-hand, then you have to hold it behind your back.”

“That’s stupid.”

“That’s safety.” I lean into her a little, dominating her despite my best intentions, and keep her wrist firmly in my grasp. “You can cut it one-handed.” I guide her knife hand smoothly through the butter, slicing it one way and then the next until the pieces are almost pea-sized. With a quick movement, I scrape the butter that’s stuck to the blade and chop through it.

“Look at me!” She smiles, her body relaxing against mine. “I’m using a knife and no one’s bleeding. It’s a miracle.”

“You’re a natural.” I use the knife to scoop the butter into the bowl. Releasing her wrist, I take a step back. “Get to stirring. We need a nice dough.”

She wiggles her butt in triumph. “I’m a chef.”

I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep from grabbing her. “Good work.”

Once we’ve finished the pie crust and prepared the filling, the kitchen is warm and flour seems to have dusted most of the counter.

She keeps looking in the oven and clapping a little. “A homemade pie. This is going to be so good.”

I walk up behind her. When she straightens, she’s up against me.

Turning, she looks up. “Did, um, you want to look at it?”

“What’s that saying? ‘A watched pie never bakes?’” I should keep my hands to myself. I don’t. With a gentle touch, I push a stray lock of hair from her forehead.

She closes her eyes again, her lips plump and inviting. I didn’t kiss her before. Maybe I was a better man then. Because now? Now, I put one hand to her throat and brush my lips against hers.

She clutches my shirt.

I kiss her harder, tasting her as she tentatively returns my touch. She's so hesitant. Is this her first kiss? The thought stokes the primal part of my brain—I want to own her first kiss, her first fuck, her first everything. I slide one hand down to her ass and pull her against me, then angle her head and run my tongue along the seam of her mouth.

She opens for me, and I delve inside, my tongue stroking hers as she melts in my arms, her body languid as I clutch her to me. She's soft, warm, and smells like the dessert we've been talking about. I want to taste her all over. I push her back against the kitchen counter, pinning her there. A moan escapes her, and I swallow it, then trail my fingers down her throat to her breast. Cupping her, I drag my thumb across her nipple.

She jolts and opens her eyes. "Heath." Shaking her head a little, she says, "We just met. I'm not good at this."

"Doesn't look that way to me." I kiss the tip of her nose but back off. I want her to be comfortable with me. Too much too soon is a sure way to spook her. Despite the ache in my cock and the need that beats at my heart like a battering ram, I turn away from her. "We better start on dinner."

"Are you mad?" She sounds so fragile.

"Of course not." I throw her a smile over my shoulder. "Just hungry. And there's always dessert."

She lets out a breath. "Good. I mean, good that you're not, you know, mad, because then it would be awkward. Wait, did me saying 'awkward' make it awkward?"

Does she have any idea how cute she is? "Not at all." I pull out a roast chicken, broccoli, and some rolls. "I got the chicken already cooked and we—" My phone buzzes in my pocket.

"Hmm?" She grabs the broccoli bunch and stares at it as if it's an utterly foreign object. "Green."

For the first time, I wish I could ignore my phone. But I know I can't. The Brotherhood has strict rules in place when it comes to offering jobs. Too many refusals and you're the one on the chopping block.

"Sorry, but I have to take this." I pull it from my pocket.

“It’s cool. I’m going to cook this broccoli to within an inch of its life.” She fumbles it, and it hits the tile floor. “Well, crap.”

“Just rinse it. It’s fine.” I hurry from the kitchen and out into the windy night.

Putting the phone to my ear, I give my name.

“Hello, Brother. I have a job.” It’s Sister Jezebel. She’s given me many jobs over the years.

“Local?”

“No.”

“Can no one else take it, Sister?”

“No.”

I glance back inside. Lena appears to be scolding the broccoli.

“When?”

“Immediate pickup.” As Sister Jezebel says it, a dark sedan pulls onto my street.

Fuck.

“Do you accept, Brother?” she asks.

I give Lena one more look. Her scolding has turned into a conversation with the roast chicken. I want to stay, but I can’t. Not this time.

“I accept.” I pocket my phone and stride away from her, the warmth of her house at my back and the coldness of the job ahead of me.

LENA

I rub my nose along the top of the baby's head and breathe in her sweet baby smell. It always calms me.

"I don't know how you do that," Janet says as she watches me. Everyone at the daycare thinks I'm a baby whisperer. If a baby is crying, they hand them off to me and instantly, the baby stops. I hold the little girl close, rocking her back and forth. My shift is over, but I want to make sure she's really asleep before I put her down. I continue to sway with her in my arms. The others might be right. The babies always do calm down when I hold them, but they also have the same effect on me.

I walk over to one of the cribs and put the little bundle of joy down. I don't want to, but I know it's time to go.

"I guess I'm out." I let out a long sigh, knowing that I'll be going home to an empty house again tonight. I try not to dwell on it.

"I wish you could stay longer but ..." Janet trails off, and I know. The rules are the rules. We can only work so many hours in a day at the daycare center. I'm maxed out for the day and have to clock out.

"It's okay." I give Janet a side hug. "Text me if you need extra hands tomorrow."

"Will do." Janet wants me to come on full-time, but I can't bring myself to make that commitment. I don't want them relying on me and then I have some weird meltdown. I hate the idea of letting someone down by not showing up to work. I only agreed to come in today because Kimber made me. She'd

been right. Once I walked in the doors of the daycare and got my hands on a little one, I felt better. Not a hundred percent but better.

I grab my bag before heading out to my car to make the short drive home. When I pull in my driveway, my eyes immediately dart over to Heath's place. I have no idea if he's home or not. There's been no movement from his place since he'd up and left before we could even have the dinner he'd asked for. I thought he was cool with me saying it was all so fast, but I guess he wasn't. I didn't hesitate because I thought it was too fast. I'd wanted him. I had no doubt about that. It was all the feelings that I was having that were overwhelming me, that had me pushing back from him. I'm not used to some of the things he made me feel. I'm far more used to panicking when I experience a barrage of emotions all at once. Just the thought of him seeing me have one of my meltdowns caused me to break our kiss. I don't know why I keep harping on it. It doesn't matter what I could've done differently. He'd gone running and hasn't come back. It wasn't one of my meltdowns that caused his sudden departure but the fact that I wasn't an easy lay.

I throw my car into park harder than I should and jerk the keys out of the ignition. The funny part is that I most likely would have let him have his way with me if he'd stuck around for the rest of the night. He had me right where he wanted me, but it turns out he didn't want me at all. Thank God he hadn't. Now I know what kind of person he really is. I want no part of him anymore.

"Jerk," I mumble, hitting my steering wheel. I don't know why I even stalked him. He is *so* not worth my stellar sleuthing skills. I rub my palm, having hit the wheel too hard. I'm stalling. Or better yet, I'm lying to myself while hoping he's going to pull up at any second, and I'll see him. And then he'll beg my forgiveness and shower me with fresh flowers and pumpkin spice lattes, and—I scream when Jinx lands on my hood.

"Jinx!" My heart pounds. I swear he smiles before he jumps off with easy grace.

I give in, pulling myself from the car and making my way inside my house with Jinx hot on my heels. I shut the door but don't lock it out of spite, as if Heath would ever even know.

"One day I'm going to figure out how you're getting out of this house." I wag my finger at Jinx.

He walks over to the sofa, hopping up to lie on the back and look out the window, his ass to me.

"Now who's the stalker?" I toss my bag onto the chair and get out my phone. It starts to ring, helping me find it as the screen lights up with Kimber's name.

"Hey," I say as I lift the phone so she can see my face.

"You still look sad."

I lie on the couch and try to look more chipper for her, though I know she knows I'm down. At least her face always brings me comfort. I shrug. "I'm okay."

"Did the babies make you feel better?"

"Yeah. You were right; I needed to get out. I felt good while I was there, but now I feel both sad and angry at the same time. I'm also disappointed that he's not who I thought he was," I say, knowing that a majority of this is my own fault. I'd built him up in my mind to be a certain way, and I can only blame myself that he's not who I thought he was.

"He could have had an emergency secret mission come up that he had to go on," Kimber says, but I know she's only trying to cheer me up.

I have to admit that it does spark my interest a little, but I have to stop living in this fantasy world that I've created. My mystery man is really not a mystery at all. He's just a man trying to get laid, and when he realized I was going to take extra effort, he ditched me.

"I wish I could come there." I mean, I could. I have money my grandmother left me. I'm just not really sure how I'd do on a plane alone.

"I wish I could come see you too." She can't up and leave classes or she'd already be here. She'd likely be next door

trying to burn down Heath's house. So it's probably a good thing she can't get out of her classes. Besides, I need to adult and figure this one out on my own.

She jostles her phone, her face going shaky for a moment. "You just need a new mission."

"Mission 'figure out how Jinx is getting out of this house?'" I joke and roll over to my side. That killer cat is a way better stalker spy than I was, that's for sure.

"How about you figure out your grandma? Heath told you some. Why don't you go digging around that house?"

"I don't know. It feels wrong?" It bothers me that I had a grandma who knew I existed but was never a part of my life. I think I'm mad at her. Mad at a dead person? Great. What does that get me? Nothing.

"You stalked the man next door," she reminds me. I stick my tongue out at her because she's right. I roll over again to lay on my side but overshoot and slip off the sofa, hitting the ground with a thud.

"You dropped me." Kimber sounds offended.

"I'm okay." I grab the phone. As I do, my eye catches a case pushed all the way back under the china cabinet. I would have missed it if not for the sun pouring in the window as it sets.

"You always bounce back." She laughs into the phone. "What are you doing? I can't see anything."

"I'm crawling over to the china cabinet," I answer like that's a reasonable response.

"Why, is he home? Are you hiding?" She whispers into the phone, flipping back into our spy mode. "We should have booby trapped his house with something. Or egged it. You would have hurt yourself making a booby trap. Egging, you might be able to get away with, but it's too late now." She sounds so disappointed. I don't trust myself with eggs anyways. Way too fragile for me.

"No, he's not home." At least I don't think he is. I didn't hear anyone pull into the driveway. I also didn't know I was going

to face plant on the floor so. Yeah. “There is something under the china cabinet. Hang on.” I put the phone down as I reach to grab it, pulling out the box. I sit up to look at it.

“Prop me up.” Kimber protests. I grab my phone, popping out the popsocket to stand her up. “What is it?”

My guess is fancy forks and spoons to go with the china cabinet. I open the case, and my eyes almost bulge out of their sockets when I see what’s inside. Why would my grandmother own a set of throwing stars? Like the kind from old kung fu movies or ninja manga. They’re lined up neatly, each of them in their designated spot. They shine and look sharp. I pick one up, examining it.

“Shurikens!” Kimber says.

“Bless you.”

“No,” she laughs. “Those are shurikens, throwing stars, aren’t they?”

“I think so.” I turn it over. “It’s wicked sharp.”

“Your grandma was a ninja,” Kimber deadpans, making me laugh.

“Maybe she was?” I hold the star between my fingers. “Now wouldn’t it be cool if that was the DNA of hers that I actually picked up?” God knows I didn’t get the traveling one or the sharp-as-a-tack one.

“Don’t you throw that—” Before she can finish the star is already gliding through the air. “Star,” she lets out with a groan. My front door flies open as the star slices through the wood trim, landing mere inches from a very angry-looking Heath.

“I guess I didn’t get that DNA gene either.”

Heath reaches up, pulling the star from the trim. “You didn’t lock your door,” he growls at me. Actually growls!

“Is that Heath?” Kimber asks.

“I don’t need to lock my door. I have these.” I pick up another one of the throwing stars.

“Get ’em,” Kimber encourages.

“Hit me with your best shot, tigress.” He smiles. Actually smiles as if he hasn’t been MIA for days. He could have gotten my number and at least sent a text or something. But no, he dropped off the face of the planet. Next, I do exactly as he requested, I hit him with my best shot.

Which, of course, isn’t very good.

HEATH

I knock the shuriken aside with ease, then hurdle the threadbare sofa, including Jinx, and drop to the floor with total control. Crossing my legs, I rest my wrists on my knees and stare at a gaping Lena.

“How did you do that?” Her eyes are wide.

“Where did you find these?” I point to the case.

“Here.” She frowns and looks at the china cabinet. “They were shoved up under this thing.” As if on cue, she sneezes.

I close the case before she tries to throw another one at my head.

Her eyebrows draw together. “Hey! What are you doing here?” Indignation rises and paints her cheeks crimson. “You ditched me. You don’t get to come into my house and touch my shoguns!” She yanks the case away from me.

“Shurikens.”

“Whatever.” She clutches the case to her chest. “So march yourself right on out of here or I’ll sic Jinx on you.”

I throw a glance at the cat. He’s still napping.

“Listen, I’m sorry about the other night. I had—”

“Go.” She climbs to her feet and points at the door. “I had to eat an entire rotisserie chicken alone and almost burned the pie because of you. Out.”

I sigh and rise, but I don't push the matter. "I really am sorry." I pat Jinx's head, then walk to the front door. "Lock it behind me."

"I'll do what I want. This is *my* house." She puts her hands on her hips.

"I get it, tigress. But if you don't lock it, I'll come right back through it anytime I want."

Her nose wrinkles. "Well in that case—" She marches over to the door as I step out onto the porch.

"If you'd just let me—"

The door slams in my face, and the lock clicks over with finality.

Fuck.



"This isn't your yard." She sits on her porch swing and drinks a large glass of iced tea. "You're trespassing."

I keep mowing, her grass high enough that I have to put in some extra elbow grease just to get the lawn mower through it. She's been watching me for ten minutes, scolding me every so often, and drinking her tea while I start to sweat. The nights are chilly now, but the days are still warm enough.

Jinx sits beside her on the swing, his tail flicking as he eyes me. I keep pushing, making neat passes back and forth. Once the front yard's cut, I jog to my garage and grab my weed eater. The back yard is quick work, and when I get around to the front, she still sits there, but now she has her phone out.

"Look at this fool, Kimber." She turns the phone around, and I can barely make out a face. "Out here cutting my grass."

"He better not expect a twenty for this."

"Nope. I won't give him a dime." She takes a big gulp of tea, her face smug, then lays the phone in her lap. "You may as

well stop, because this show of neighborly affection is getting you nowhere.”

“Oh?” I trim the high grass around her mailbox until it looks perfectly edged, then I put the weedeater down, leaning it against the red post. I stretch, then reach behind my neck and grab my shirt.

“What are you—”

I pull it off and tuck it into the side of my gym shorts. “Hot out here.” I grin at her, then grab the weedeater and get back to work.

She’s stopped sipping her tea, and I can feel her gaze on me as I edge along the sidewalk. “Go to class,” she grumbles to her friend. “This is an act of war.”

I smirk and finish up along the line of her driveway. Her yard finally looks respectable, and I use my forearm to wipe the sweat from my brow.

She pretends to be reading something on her phone, but her peripheral vision is entirely on me.

“Any other chores you need done?” I lean against one of the porch posts.

“Why would I want a chore done only halfway? I mean, you’ll run off before you’re done, so it really isn’t worth the bother.” She sighs and drains her glass of tea.

I lick my lips. “I know it doesn’t erase what I did, but I truly am sorry I had to leave.”

She finally meets my gaze. “Why? What was so important?”

“Something came up.”

Her lips purse. “Mm-hmmm. So when you realized I wasn’t just going to open my legs and let you have at it, you decided that something came up.”

“What?” Is that what she thinks? I admit leaving was a dick move, not that I had a real choice in the matter, but she’s got the reasoning all wrong.

“Yeah, you came over here thinking we’d make a pie and then I’d go to bed with you. When you realized I wasn’t so easy, you took off.”

I climb the stairs and walk over to her.

She swallows hard as she cranes her head back to look at me, though she takes the long route, with her gaze rolling up my abs and chest.

“I never thought you were easy. And I wouldn’t want you to be. That’s not why I left. I would have gladly spent the whole evening with you—no funny business.”

“Sure.” She sets her tea down and crosses her arms. “So that’s why you fled after I broke our kiss?” Rising, she tries to look pissed, but I can see the hurt in her eyes. “Something came up. Of course.”

“My work is somewhat ...” How do I say this? “Demanding.”

“Oh, what, did someone else’s dishwasher break, and they needed a fixer?” she challenges, her full lips growing almost pouty.

I want to taste them. Right here, right now. But I have to soft pedal this. She’s hurt, and I’m the one who did the hurting.

“Something like that, yes. When work calls, I have to answer.”

“Or they’ll fire you?”

More like dismember me and scatter the pieces. “Yes, and I can’t afford to lose my job.”

“So they called you that night?”

“Yes.”

“Where’d you go? What was broken?”

The first truth is Bolivia, and the second is that plenty of necks had been broken by the time my job was done. Instead of that, I say, “It was out of the country, and they needed me to solve an ongoing issue with a foreign government.”

“Government? So you’re a spy?” She has an ‘ah ha’ tone.

“No.” I try to put as much honesty in my words as possible. “But I swear to you, if I could’ve stayed with you that night, I would have.” I take a chance and tip her chin up. She doesn’t smack me away, so I continue, “And I don’t care how long it takes, I want to taste your dessert.”

Her eyelids flutter at my innuendo.

“If we don’t make another pie anytime soon, that’s all right. I’ll wait for you. When you’re comfortable, we’ll get back to it.” I want to taste her right now. Does she wear these tight yoga pants to punish me? Because it’s working. They stick to her, giving me a glimpse of everything I want. “We’ll take this at your pace.” Despite my desire for her, I mean what I say. I won’t take control until she gives me the reins.

She nibbles her lip for a moment, and Jinx twirls around her ankles, his fluffy tail urging her to make the right choice. “You promise you left for work?”

I take her hand and place it on my chest over my heart. “I swear to you, Lena. I had to leave for work.”

Her face softens just a bit and she presses her warm palm against my bare skin. “I shouldn’t believe you, definitely shouldn’t forgive you.” When her eyes meet mine again, I can feel her wavering.

“Let me make it up to you?”

She throws a glance at the yard. “Isn’t that what the lawn mowing was for?”

I smile. “That just needed to be done. No, I want to really make it up to you. How about I take you to dinner tonight at VonMichael’s?”

She cocks her head to the side. “That’s the fanciest restaurant in town. No one can get reservations unless it’s months and months in advance.”

“I can.” I squeeze her hand as it still rests over my heart. “Can I pick you up at eight?”

She chews her lips some more, something akin to worry crossing over her face. “Um, let’s make it seven. I keep old

lady dinner hours.”

“It’s a date.” I pull her hand to my lips and kiss it.

“All right.” She nods and lets out a shaky sigh.

I reluctantly surrender her hand, then head toward the stairs.

“Hey, you’re not done,” she calls, and when I turn back to her, she gives me a devious smile. “You said you were available for another chore.” She leans down and pats Jinx on the head. “I’ve got a litter box that could use a good cleaning.”

I groan, but then it turns into a laugh. “If that’s what it takes to earn your forgiveness, then lead me to the box of pain.” I eye Jinx, who I could swear is smiling, and Lena laughs.

She grins and gestures toward her front door. “After you.”

LENA

“Is this dress too short?” I turn around to show Kimber my back side. I bend over a little to see how high the dress rides up.

“I see you trimmed the hedges, too.” I jerk around to look at her with my mouth open.

“I did no such thing!” Okay, maybe I trimmed up a little down there, but there’s no way she could see that. “Is it really that short?” I pull at the bottom of the dress. It ends mid-thigh, but I’m not really used to wearing dresses. It’s slim pickings in my wardrobe when it comes to fancy clothes. Since this is one of the nicest restaurants around, I don’t think yoga pants or cut-off shorts are going to fly. I need to fit in so that no one stares at me. I’m already flustered about going out with Heath on a date, wearing this dress and going to a place that has a lot of people. I’m praying that I can make it through this without embarrassing myself in front of him.

“It was a test and you failed. Now I know you *did* shave your lady business.” She points at me with a smug look on her face. “I don’t blame you. The man didn’t only mow your lawn, he weed whacked it and cut your hedges.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “That’s dedication.”

I know. It was torture to watch him in all his sweaty glory, pushing that mower across my yard. The man is built but lean. I was already having a hard time staying mad at him, and then he went and took off his shirt. I half wanted to yell at him to put it back on, not wanting Mrs. Winsten next door to see him,

but my other half wanted to enjoy his defined abs for myself. I couldn't keep my eyes off of him or the way the sweat dripped down his body as he labored to gain my forgiveness. Thoughts of him working to pleasure me had crossed my mind more than once during his little lawn show. His attention to detail had me squeezing my thighs together.

"You think he was telling the truth?" I ask, breaking myself from my own thoughts. I look down at my feet. Crap I'm going to need shoes. "About his job calling him away?"

"Lena." Kimber says my name softly. I look back up at her through the phone.

"The man is sexy as fuck. He doesn't have to work at getting laid. If he's looking for an easy lay, he'd go get one."

I scrunch my face, not enjoying that thought.

"But he's not!" she shouts, jerking me from my jealous imaginings. "He's working at getting time with you. He's committed. So yeah, I believe him that he got called to work and had to leave you that night. I wasn't a fan at first, especially since he ditched you, but the lawn and the apology and the dinner? Yeah, I think he's trying, he's not just out for what he can get."

More relief fills my chest. I believed him, but getting Kimber's reassurance makes me feel better. I'm the one who makes up crazy stories about Heath in my head, whereas Kimber is the more rational one. Well, sometimes. If we don't count her wanting to egg Heath's house and booby trap it. She always has my best interest at heart, and I know it hurts her to see me sad.

"I really like him." I fiddle with the hem of the dress. My anxiety is starting to grow a little. I tamp it down, because I want this. To go and be able to have a nice dinner and get to know him. I never thought the desire to be close to someone could outweigh the anxiety that came with it, until Heath. This is a big step for me, but it's one that I need to take.

"You're going," Kimber says firmly. We both know it will be good for me.

I nod. “Yes, I really want to go.” I acted smug on the front porch, feeling as though I had the upper hand, but I was on my own turf so it was easy. Now, we’re venturing out into the night. I think I’ll be okay. When I’m near him, I feel calmer. Even when we’d cut the butter together with a real, actual, sharp knife, he had this soothing effect over me. It was more intense than when I hold the babies at work. I only grow flustered with Heath if I think I’m going to do something to embarrass myself that will send him running. I’m hoping in public that same calming feeling will be there, and I’ll be okay. “I like him,” I admit.

“Well duh.” She laughs.

“This was supposed to be a spy mission.”

“You were never on a spy mission. You were on a ‘stalk the sexiness next door’ mission.”

I give her a glare. She knows I hate when she calls him sexy. I think I have jealousy issues. I guess you can add that to my list of quirks. It is never-ending.

“What happens when he finds out I’m crazy and goes running for the hills, taking my heart with him?”

“Then we burn his house down.” I wait for her to laugh but she doesn’t. “Now, moving on, the silver flats. Do not. I repeat do not wear those pink heels you got last year that are still in the box.”

“But they’d match.” I motion to my simple white dress. I love it. It cups me tight up top holding my boobs in place but flares out some as it tapers down. There is a little bit of tulle under it to make it swish back and forth when I move.

“You almost killed yourself when you bought them.”

She’s right. I did. I could barely walk across the store with them on, but I bought them anyway. They are dainty and pretty, and I love them.

“They have bows on them,” I remind her. Silky ones that tie at the side and are the cutest things that have ever existed. Except for babies. Those are cuter. Except for the Petersons’ baby. I don’t know what happened there.

Jinx meows as if he can read my thoughts. “You’re a brat. No cute compliment for you.” I point at him.

“That pink bow is killer.” Kimber throws her hands up. “You know what? Wear them.”

“You just want to say I told you so.”

“Maybe. I also know you’ll have to hang all over Heath to walk in them so...” She grins. “He’s about to find out how easy you really are.” I roll my eyes at her fake burn.

I head toward my closet and begin throwing things out until I find the heels. I grab them up before taking one last look in the mirror. “Lip gloss!” Kimber yells. I rush toward the bathroom, snagging some and putting it on.

“I’ll call you later.” I lift the phone.

“Unless you die in those heels.”

“Ha ha.” I hang up on her. Then I call her back. She quirks a smile at me when she answers.

“Love you, too,” she says, knowing why I called back.

“Love you.”

“Have fun.” This time I really hang up, putting her and my lip gloss in my bag as I sit down on the sofa to put on my shoes. I fix the cute pink bows on the side and wait for Heath.

There’s a knock at my door, and I get up to go and answer it. I’m pretty much walking at a snail’s pace and wishing I would have chosen the silver flats. Kimber says I walk like a baby deer in these, and yeah, she’s right.

Heath knocks again before I can even walk the small distance. I swing the door open to be greeted by his handsome scowl. Why the hell is he scowling when I’m the one walking in these heels?

“Do you always answer the door without asking who it is?” His tone is serious.

I shrug, because I never get company so I’m not really sure. The delivery people who come just leave the boxes. I never have to talk or even see them.

“Should I be worried? Are you a killer waiting to strike? I think the neighborhood is safe,” I tease him.

A weird expression crosses his face as he steps in the door. His eyes roam my body from head to toe. He leans in and my breath catches. He kisses me on the cheek. His soft lips and warm breath cause my cheek to tingle.

“You look beautiful, tigress.” He moves his mouth, brushing my ear before kissing me right below it. “Check the door before you answer it or next time I’ll bend you over the sofa, flip up that little dress of yours and spank your ass.”

My breath hitches. My whole body starts to buzz. Shouldn’t that make me mad? Mad is not what I am feeling right now. I’m at a loss for words so I go with trying to be sassy.

“Don’t tempt me.” I wink at him as I start to walk by him and out the front door, but of course, I trip on my heels. Instead of meeting the floor like I’m used to, I’m captured by two strong arms.

“I think you’re already doing the tempting.” He holds his hand out. “Key.”

I give it to him, and he locks up, then he guides me down the sidewalk toward his sleek black Mercedes. He opens the passenger door for me and helps me into the car. Closing my door, he rounds the car and gets in. I think this is the nicest car that I’ve ever been in, though there’s a reddish-brown smudge on the dashboard in front of me. I reach out to touch it, but he takes my hand.

“Oh.” He opens the glove box and pulls out a napkin. “I had it detailed. The guys must have had something on their cloth when they wiped it down.” Wiping away the crimson smudge, he tosses the napkin back into the glove box and closes it, then turns to me with an easy smile. “Ready?”

HEATH

That was close. I take a deep breath and back out of her driveway. I throw one more glance to the dashboard to check for any more blood splatter. Relief filters through me when I see that was the only one.

“This car is so nice.” She pats the passenger door. “What’s its name?”

“Its name?”

She turns to me, her green eyes sparkling and her lips tempting. “Your car doesn’t have a name?”

“Does yours?”

“Peri. Short for periwinkle, of course.” She scoffs and runs a finger down the center console. “This car needs a sleek name, something sexy.”

“Like Lena?” I ask.

She smiles and shakes her head lightly. “Aren’t you a smooth one?”

“I try.” I reach over and take her hand. She’s warm and sweet. Far too innocent for a man like me. But I want her all the same. Mildred wouldn’t approve. I’m supposed to protect her, not lust after her. Then again, Mildred knew what sort of man I am. I suppose I’ll never know the real reason why she asked me to be her granddaughter’s guardian.

“So, I still don’t know much about you. Tell me about your parents.” She glances down where our hands are joined.

I run my thumb along her delicate knuckles. “They live in Montana.”

“So you’re from Montana?”

“No.” Buildings rise up around us as we enter downtown.

“Where are you from?” She narrows her eyes.

“I was a military brat, so we lived all over.” I shrug. “What about you?”

“My mom is around. Or, at least I think she is.” Her tone is colored by sadness. “She sort of left when I took up with Kimber and inherited Grandma’s house.” She shakes it off, though. “But I’m sure she’s doing fine. No news is good news, right?”

“Right,” I agree and turn onto a side street.

A valet steps out to take the car.

Lena grips my fingers tighter and turns to me. “I can do this, right?” The fear in her eyes plucks at heartstrings I didn’t know existed.

“Of course.” I reach over and stroke her cheek. “You can do anything.”

“I can?”

“Believe it.”

She smiles, the fear melting away. “Okay.”

“Good.” I open my door and step out, then wave the valet away. Walking around the car, I open the door for her and help her out.

She clings to my side, her full breasts pressing against my arm as I guide her into the restaurant. Chandeliers sparkle and the dark, polished tables fan out before us.

“Welcome.” The host greets us with a smile. “Is there a reservation?”

“Goodwin,” I give one of my many names.

“I’ve always liked that name on your mailbox.” She smiles.

“Please follow me.” The host leads us to a table at the back, and I ease her into her chair. The shoes she’s wearing are girly and cute, but she is courting a broken neck at this point. I’d like to pull them off her and nibble my way up her legs, but I have to temper my desire. The last thing I want is to scare her or have her think I’m only after a quick fuck. I want far more from her. The spanking I mentioned earlier is just a start, and my blood heats when I think of how her cheeks colored, the way she licked her glossy lips at the thought of my hands on her body.

“Where’d you go?” She takes a sip from her water glass.

I give her my full attention. “Just thinking about you.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I’m afraid I can’t share that information.” I take her hand again, weaving our fingers together. “Classified.”

“I knew you were a spy.” She meets my gaze, her heart-shaped face already burned into my memory. Her dress is low-cut and white, and her round breasts are perfectly accented by the scooping neckline. I want to run my tongue along it, then pull it down and take a tight nipple into my mouth.

“That dress is perfect on you.” I openly admire it, my gaze sliding down her body.

“Thanks.” She swallows hard. “You look so good right now.” She frowns a little. “I mean not just right now. You always look good. Even when you’re all sweaty on your treadmill and ...” She trails off. “Not that I, um, watch you on your treadmill. That would be creepy.” Her high, forced laugh draws a real one from me.

“You can watch me all you like.” I draw her fingers to my mouth, then kiss her knuckles softly. “But perhaps you’d be able to see more up close.”

Her breath hitches, and I love the reactions I pull from her. “Up close?”

“Mm-hmm.” I run my teeth along her knuckles, and she squirms.

“Sir, the wine list.” A server has been standing and waiting for quite a while, but finally got up the nerve to speak and break the moment.

I sigh and wave the list away. “Do you like wine, tigress?”

“I’m not much of a drinker.” She shrugs.

Good. I want her mind clear when I lick her until she screams tonight. “We’ll stick with water.” I peruse the brief food menu. “I’ll have the beef Wellington, rare.”

She taps her finger on her chin as she studies the paper. “Can I have the um, what’s this thing?” She points.

I lean over, breathing her in. “Roast pheasant. A bird that can be gamey, but I assume is perfectly prepared here.”

The waiter nods. “It certainly is. The chef brines and roasts them herself every afternoon. Then she matches them with lovely fresh greens, a compote of fig, and a nest of haricot verts.”

“Hair coverts, yes. That sounds like me.” She nods. “I’ll have that.”

Sexy and naïve, she is the combination that will break me. I can already feel it, her loveliness cutting through every layer of ice and rock around my heart.

The waiter takes the menus and hurries off as more people begin to trickle into the restaurant.

Lena looks around, her gaze darting to the front doors every time they open.

“Hey.” I reach over and gently tug her chin around so she’s looking at me. “Everything’s okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Definitely. If you want to leave at any time, just say the word.” I want her to feel safe with me, to know that no matter what is going on in her beautiful mind, I won’t judge her, won’t look down on her.

Her shoulders curl inward and she keeps staring at the door as more people arrive. Her words come out in a whispered

torrent, “I’m sorry, I just get all freaked out and I don’t like to leave home and I try to hide it but then it comes out and I feel like a—”

I kiss her. I lean across the table, put one hand on her throat, and claim her lips for my own. She makes a surprised sound, then closes her eyes. I pull her closer, the table jolting as I grab her waist and yank her to my lap. Her taste is sweet and cold from the water, and I want to drown in her. She puts her hands on my shoulders as I angle her head to the side, deepening the kiss as she melts against me, her anxiety fading as I soothe her with my body, my heart, my soul.

People are staring. I don’t care. The waiter is hovering. I still don’t care. I kiss her until she’s panting, her heart racing, and her body molding itself to mine.

When I finally release her, I lick my lips as she stares at me wide-eyed.

“You kissed me.”

“Yes.” I run my hand up her back until I come to her soft skin. “I’d like to do more than that.”

“You kissed me in front of all these people.” She blushes so beautifully as I stroke her skin with my fingertips.

“Would you like me to do it again?” I lean closer, her mouth a lure I can’t resist.

“I—”

“Sir.” The waiter stands stiffly with our dinner in his hands.

“Let’s eat, little tigress.” I drop one more kiss on her lips, then help her back to her chair, my heart thumping hard right along with hers. “But we’ll save dessert for when I take you home.”

LENA

*H*ow can my feet hurt? I've been sitting all night. That last trip to the bathroom almost ended my life. That'll teach me to ever wear these shoes again. Next time I'll go with the flats for sure. I should have listened to Kimber. She's always freaking right. Not that I'm going to tell her that.

Dinner was delicious. I've never had pheasant before, but it was tender and the flavor was mouthwatering. I'm not sure what all of that other fancy stuff was that came with it, but I ate it anyway. Even though I tried to enjoy every single morsel of my food, there was an underlying race to get through dinner. I wanted more of what Heath had offered me when I was sitting in his lap. That kiss was the best part of the meal.

"Lena." Heath's voice interrupts my thoughts of more kisses—some not on my mouth—with him. I must have zoned out for a minute.

"Do you want anything for dessert?" he asks with a grin on that handsome face. I suddenly get nervous about what the end of our meal actually signals. I was racing to get through it, but now my nerves are starting to kick in regarding my inexperience. What if I'm terrible at whatever it is we do when we get back to my place?

"Can I see the menu?" I stall.

The waiter opens it to the dessert page and places it in my hand. I hold it up, trying to peek over the top to see Heath's expression. He's still smiling as I continue to study the

desserts. "I'll have the cheesecake," I tell the waiter as I hand him back the menu.

"For you, sir?" The waiter asks Heath, whose eyes never leave mine as he gives his answer.

"No thank you. I have a craving for something in particular, and I can only get it at home." He licks his lips.

I squeeze my thighs together. "On second thought, I'll take that dessert to go."

Heath throws his head back and laughs as the waiter leaves our table. God, his laugh is killer. His playfulness puts me at ease about everything, and now I don't want to stall. He's got me going in all different directions, but I'm certain about one thing: I want this.

"I don't know what I'm doing." I fiddle with the napkin in my lap.

"I don't know what it is you think you don't know, but everything I've seen you do tonight has been perfect."

"How about when I tried to walk to the bathroom in my heels?" I tease.

"Adorably sexy," he says easily.

I soak in every compliment he gives me. I will never grow tired of hearing them from his mouth. I don't think anyone has ever called me either of those things. Could I actually have found someone who might be okay with my little quirks? This almost feels too good to be true, but he *does* look at me like I'm both adorable and sexy. I didn't know someone could be both, but I feel that way when his eyes flick over me. When he gives me one of those smirks.

Heath stands up, walks over to me, and pulls out my chair after grabbing the to-go bag and dropping money on the table. I begin to walk, leaning into him to help, wincing at the pain that these damn heels are causing me. I let out a small yelp when I'm lifted off my feet. Heath carries me from the restaurant easily, not caring that everyone is turning to look our way. I find that I don't either. He's taking care of me, and I like it. No, I *love* it.

I lay my head on his shoulder, enjoying the warmth of his body. His strong arms hold me close. He moves in fluid motions as he carries me as if I weigh no more than a few pounds. I know people are watching us, but no sense of panic comes. Not when I'm in his arms. It's as though nothing can touch me. He wouldn't allow it.

When we reach the doors, I see his sleek car at the curb already waiting for us. The valet approaches us and hands Heath the keys.

"You need a hand?" the valet asks Heath after his eyes roam over me. I think he means more than getting the car door open for me because Heath can obviously handle that. I'm not great at reading people sometimes. When I feel Heath's entire body stiffen, I know what the valet meant.

My face flushes. A threesome? I'm not even sure if I'm going to be able to handle this twosome. Even though Heath is a big enough man that he could possibly be counted as two people. Oh my God. Does this mean his cock is going to be giant, too? Will it fit inside me? Will it hurt? My mind runs off instead of focusing on what's going on.

Heath doesn't respond to the valet. He continues walking to the car, opens the door and places me inside. He kisses my lips gently.

"I'll be right back, and then we'll head home." His voice is calm. Too calm. He closes my door and walks over to the valet stand. I'm not sure what is actually said but the valet's face becomes ashen.

If you blinked, you would have missed it. Well, I guess I did blink because one second he's talking to the valet and the next the man is on the ground. I have no idea how he got there. Heath is already strolling over to the car and hopping into the driver's seat. I sit there shocked for a second.

"Did you..." I trail off, because I don't know what he did to the valet, but I know he did *something*.

"Teach him a lesson?" He supplies. "Yes."

“But—” I trail off again, thinking. “Wouldn’t his lesson be mowing my lawn? That’s the more proper punishment, right?”

“Only *I* mow your lawn.”

I let out a small gasp. “You’re jealous!”

“Don’t sound so happy about it.” He glances over at me.

I think he’s pouting. Or, at least he’s got the best pout a spy can give. I know I keep joking about the spy thing, but some things are creepy spot on. Creepy cool. I shouldn’t think that but I do. There are a lot of things I shouldn’t think about him, but I can’t help myself. My thoughts are consumed by him. His every move, his every word, and most of all, his every touch has me craving him.

“You think other men want to take me from you?” The steering wheel groans as his grip on it tightens. “You’re itching for that spanking I teased you about.”

“I don’t think you were teasing.” I glance over at him, enjoying all of this way too much. It’s the first time that I’ve gone out in a social setting with someone that’s not Kimber. I’m pretty proud of myself for making it through dinner, but I know Heath was a big part of that. I think if it were anyone else besides him, it may not have gone so well. I almost laugh at the thought of me going from zero to a hundred. Instead of taking baby steps, I’d jumped right into this thing with my mysterious neighbor. But it feels right. Almost natural. The more I think about it, I really think that’s true. I’ve been drawn to him from the very start.

We continue to share banter back and forth until we pull up to our homes. Now my heart starts to race. I want him to come in, but is he going to? Is this where I suggest coffee? I don’t even have coffee. A night cap? I don’t have that either. Double crap.

“You want me to come in, don’t you, Lena?” He shifts his car into park in my driveway.

I nod. He’s making this easy for me.

“Then I’ll come in. Easy as that.” He gets out of the car, coming around to my side to open the door. Again, he lifts me

before my heels can meet the ground and carries me toward my house. "All you have to say is stop and I will."

I nod again in understanding. I'm not going to say stop. He opens my door, kicking it closed behind him and depositing me on the sofa. He walks back, locks the door and arms the alarm that I never use. Before I can ask how he knows the code, he's on me. All thoughts of anything else vanish.

HEATH

I can't go one more second without a taste of her, so I take it, covering her body with mine and pressing her down into the sofa. She wraps her arms around my neck and answers my kiss with her own, as if she's just as hungry for me.

Running one hand down her side, I grip her hip and slide one knee between her thighs. She's warm for me, her body pliant in my hands.

Deepening the kiss, I caress her tongue with mine. She's tentative at first, turning her head and trying to get the right angle. I run my fingers into her silky hair and pull, opening her to me just the way I need.

She moans, her tongue testing mine as I claim every bit of her sweet mouth. Her breasts press against me, her thighs warm. But I need more. I need her naked.

Pulling back, I scoop her up and carry her to her bedroom.

She's breathless, and she kisses my throat as I set her on the bed. Dropping to one knee, I pull her foot to me, then slide her cute pink heel off. I take the other and do the same, my eyes drawn to the shadowy heaven between her legs.

"That feels so good," she sighs.

"I haven't done anything yet." I kiss up her calf.

"The shoes." She puts her palm to her mouth. "Sorry, I meant the—Oh!"

I bite the inside of her thigh.

“That’s so, so ...” She gasps as I run my tongue up her smooth skin.

Sliding my fingers under the hem of her dress, I push it up until I see the lacy pink panties she’s wearing for me. She intended to have me here on my knees, and I’m more than happy to oblige.

“I bet your pussy is just as pink.” I hook my fingers in the elastic and pull them down. Looking up at her, I see her nipples could cut glass, her face flushed and her eyes glassy. “Pull your dress down. Show me those perfect tits.”

“You have a filthy mouth,” she tries to scold me, but her hands give her away. They pull her dress down, showing me her tight, pink nipples.

I surge up and take one in my mouth, pushing her down on the bed as I suck and lick her.

She arches, her hands in my hair, her breathing erratic as I cup the other one. It’s more than a handful, and the nipple is begging to be bitten. I switch to it as she moans, and I rock my hips against her, her wetness seeping through my pants.

“Soaked for me, aren’t you, little tigress?” My mouth waters.

“I want you,” she whimpers.

“Fuck.” I run my teeth along her breast, then pull back.

With a yank, I pull her dress all the way off and admire my prize. She may have been shy earlier, before I pulled her into my lap in the restaurant, before I bit her thigh, before I sucked her delicious tits. But now, she’s just ready.

Flattening my palm on her chest, I push her down, then settle between her pale thighs. When I spread her legs, my cock threatens to burst my zipper. Her pink lips are glistening with sweetness, and her little flower is begging to be explored by my tongue, my fingers, my cock. I’ll give her every bit of me. But first ... I lick from her entrance to her clit.

She jerks, her hands squeezing her kitty bedspread. “Heath!”

I slide my hands beneath her, cupping her ass and lifting her to me like a feast. I devour her, lick and suck every inch of her skin, wanting to mark my claim and taste every bit of my Lena.

When I focus on her entrance and plunge my tongue inside her, she squirms, her tits bouncing as I tongue-fuck her. Reaching up, I palm one of her perfect tits and knead it as I surge inside her, tasting and savoring every bit of her wetness.

“You taste so good.” I lick my lips, then focus on her clit. “Look at me, tigress. I want to watch you as I make you scream.”

“Heath, I can’t even ...” She doesn’t finish her sentence as I suck her clit between my teeth. Focusing on it, I whip my tongue along it, teasing her tighter and tighter. Her thighs start to shake as I rub the broadside of my tongue against her in quick strokes. When I ease a finger inside her, she gasps, and when I add a second, her hips freeze.

“Heath!” She clutches my hair as her pussy convulses, squeezing my fingers as she moans out her release and I keep sucking her tender flesh. Her body unwinds with each wave of her orgasm until she’s heavy and panting, her fingers finally relaxing. I kiss her perfect pussy all over, then stand and shuck my shirt, pants, and boxer briefs.

When my cock springs free, her eyes widen.

I grip it and stroke it. “Look what you’ve done to me, Lena.” I step toward her. “All this is for you, and you’re going to take every inch.”

“Heath.” She shakes her head and sits up. “I don’t think I can.”

“You can.” I reach down and grab her small hand. “Feel it.”

I groan when she wraps her fingers around me, then gives me a curious stroke. “Like this?”

“If you want me to come on your face, then yes.”

Her mouth opens in surprise. “Really?”

“Look at you, tigress.” I run my hand into her hair. “I’ve never seen anything sexier in my life. I’d be happy to come in your

general vicinity, that's how much I want you."

She smiles at that, then strokes me again with more certainty.
"Can I taste it?"

I know then that she's trying to kill me. "Yes," I hiss.

She darts her tongue out and licks me. "Hmm." She opens her mouth and fastens her lips around my head.

My hips jerk, and I tighten my grip at the back of her head.
"Like that."

She takes me deeper, gags a little, then tries again. Her hot mouth is a wet dream, and I won't last if she keeps running her tongue along the underside of my cock. She's trying to kill me. Too many nights I've thought of just this. I wouldn't even get myself off. Only she would do.

I pull away, then grab her and lay her in the center of the bed.

"Hey, I was just getting started."

"Later, tigress, you can taste my cock all you want, but for now, I need to be inside your tight body." Prowling up her fair skin, I spread her legs and nestle my cock against her wet pussy as I suck her luscious tits. Before long, she's writhing again, her legs spread even wider, her nails digging into my shoulders.

"I want you."

"You want all of me?" I kiss her again, tonguing her mouth with a reckless, plundering need.

"Yes," she says against my lips.

I push my head inside.

She tenses.

"Shh." I keep kissing her. "It's going to feel so good."

When she relaxes, I push harder, my muscles shaking as I try to control my need to fuck her hard and make her scream.

"Are you all right?" I stay still.

"Yeah, it just feels ... kind of strange." She takes a deep breath.

I push all the way inside, my cock hardening even more as I grit my teeth against the need to come. After a moment, I pull back out and start a slow rhythm. “How is it now?”

She runs her nails down my biceps. “Good.”

I kiss her neck and grind my hips closer, working against her clit with each stroke. Her noises tell me she likes it, and when she grips my hair I know I’m hitting her sweet spot. I stay there, rolling my hips into her, fucking her tight pussy as I make love to her with my mouth. Our kiss is never-ending as I surge inside her again and again, stretching her and giving her pleasure as I dance on the edge of a knife. I want to come, to coat her with me, to mark her as mine. But not until she comes on my cock. I need to feel her come apart, to shatter beneath me.

“Wrap your legs around me.” I bite the spot below her ear.

She does as I say, her heels digging into my lower back. I lift her with ease until we’re almost face to face. I’m on my knees as she straddles me, impaled on my cock. With one arm around her, I piston into her and palm one of her tits. My mouth follows as I bend her back, my teeth running along her hard bud as she spreads wide, coming down hard on me. Running one hand between us, I use my thumb to circle her clit.

Her hands come to my shoulders, her nails digging in as her movements become wilder. I take her back down to the bed, dominating her body as I take her hands and brace them against the headboard. Returning to her clit, I thumb it as I fuck her hard, each thrust jarring the bed, each impact creating a smacking sound of sweaty flesh.

“You’re close, tigress. I want you to let go. Give it all to me.” I press harder with my thumb.

Her body arches, her hands flat against the headboard. She comes on a silent scream, her body unravelling as I suck her nipple, my hips working her hard. I feel her squeezing me, coaxing my cum out. I can’t deny her, not now, not when she’s spread beneath me, giving me everything. So I let go.

I groan, my cock kicking and pulsing as I shoot inside her. Her walls squeeze me even more, wringing every last drop from my hard cock as I grind against her, getting deep, marking her with my seed like a fucking animal. But that's what I am. I'm her animal, and she is my tigress.

Breathing hard, I rest on my elbows as she wipes her forehead with one hand.

"You all right?"

"I'm ..." She lets out a long exhale. "Great." Her smile is something from a pleasant dream, and I can't stop myself from kissing her again.

She responds, her tongue dancing with mine.

With a quick roll, I pull her on top of me.

She kisses my chest. "I have to go, um, go to the ah—"

"Go pee. I'm good here." I kiss her sweaty forehead.

She laughs and jumps from the bed, then almost trips over Jinx. "You watched the whole thing, you furry perv?" She hurries down the hall, and he follows.

I straighten the sheets and am fluffing her pillow when my phone vibrates. My heart sinks, but I reach down to my pants and grab it.

"Brother?" Sister Jezebel asks.

"I'm here."

"We have a job for you."

"Where?"

"LA. A car is coming for immediate evac."

Lena starts humming in the bathroom, her off key tune louder than the hum of the sink. I stare at the ceiling and drum my fingers on my chest. If I leave now, it's over with her. Not even free lawncare for a year could repair that sort of damage.

"Brother?" Sister Jezebel presses.

I take a deep breath. "I exercise my pass."

She pauses, then says, “You get only one, Brother. No more passes. Ever. Are you certain you’d like to use it on Mildred’s granddaughter?”

Of course the Brotherhood knows—they keep tabs on all their operatives—but Sister Jezebel’s smugness still rankles. I glance at the hallway where Lena’s off-tune song continues and Jinx sits, his green eyes trained on me. Can I give this up? Walk out on Lena and throw away my chance with her? Jinx’s whiskers twitch. I guess I have my answer.

“Use my pass.”

Sister Jezebel clears her throat. “It’s done.”

The phone goes silent, and I toss it to the floor as Lena prances into the room, a fluffy robe wrapped around her.

“Ditch the clothes.” I pat the bed next to me. “I want to kiss every inch of you.”

She bites her lip. “That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble,” she scolds, but she drops the robe, giving me a view that could kill a lesser man.

I crook my finger at her. “Come here, tigress. It’s time you got tamed.”

LENA

I let out a long sigh as Heath runs kisses along my shoulder. The warm shower and his mouth are putting me to sleep. I'd slipped under the spray to help myself wake up. I have no idea how long I've been in bed with him. Hours, days, weeks? It doesn't matter, because it's been wonderful. It couldn't have been weeks because the water is still on and the power is working. They would have shut it off by now for nonpayment. I do know there have been a few shared showers and meals in bed. And sex. So. Much. Sex.

"Feeling dirty?" His voice rumbles through me.

"You found me." I turn in his arms.

He was gone when I woke up this last time. When my eyes opened, sunlight was pouring into the window, and I'm guessing Heath slipped next door to get himself some coffee. I probably should get one of those fancy machines he has so that he can have coffee here. The other solution is that we could just live together. *Okay, Lena, pull it back.* Let's not send the man running with the stalker tendencies I have towards him. Heath never leaves except to grab stuff so maybe these stalking feelings go both ways. I still get turned on when I think about how jealous he got over me when the valet made that comment. I shouldn't have enjoyed it, but I did.

"Why are you smiling so big?" He starts to wash my body for me.

"You're naked in my shower." That is reason enough to smile. He doesn't have to know it's partly because of his jealousy. No

need to poke that beast. Or maybe I should poke it a little? That's terrible of me to think. Oh, well. We can't all be perfect and innocent. Everyone has their flaws. Except Heath. So far, he doesn't have any flaws. I thought I'd found one with him being work-obsessed but he hasn't brought up anything work-related in the past two or three days. That's my honest guess on how long it's been since we stumbled into my house and he's spoiled my body with pleasure.

He nips my neck. "Me naked? That all?"

I slip my hands up his broad chest to wrap around his neck, then pull him down for a kiss. It's been at least an hour since he's had his mouth on me. So, forever, basically. He comes willing, giving me what I want. Our mouths meet as he kisses me deeply. I moan into his mouth. How have I lived without this?

I eventually let him finish washing me and then return the favor by sliding my hands all over his body. I pay extra attention to his hard cock, loving that I've made it that way.

"Your phone keeps ringing," he tells me as he pulls me from the shower and starts drying me off.

"I know. I need to talk to Kimber, or she'll show up here." I've sent a few texts, but it isn't enough for her. She let that fly at first but now she's at her limit. She jokingly threatened me in our last text and made me promise I would call. I don't blame her. I'd feel the same way if the roles were reversed.

I should've called her when I realized Heath had gone to his house this morning. I would've been able to give her all the juicy details of the best few days of my life. My story is going to be a little more tame since he's here, though.

"Get dressed. Talk to your friend." He gives me another kiss. "I'm going for a run to work this off."

I glance down at his cock. "I can help." I start to reach for him. He grabs my wrist in a gentle hold.

"If we start, we both know that we won't stop. Call your friend. I'll run." He shifts, popping his neck and then rolling his shoulders. I'm guessing a man of his size is used to

working out. I've seen him run on the treadmill for hours at a time. I've also had him over me, under me, and behind me, pleasuring me for hours. So I know he's in tiptop shape.

"Okay, fine." I turn, making sure that my elbow hits my small bottle of perfume on the side of my sink. Heath's hand reaches out, and he catches it in the blink of an eye. No denying his cat-like reflexes. It's probably another reason that Jinx favors him. To me, it's confirmation that he's a spy. How else could he just work whenever he wants to and go traveling the world at the drop of a hat? He sets the bottle back on the counter, and his eyes meet mine in the mirror. He gives me a look that says he knows what I'm doing. I try to feign innocence. I'm not sure it works, but I get a kiss on the shoulder and a slap on my bottom that makes me yelp in fake pain before he slips out of my bathroom.

I smile in the mirror at myself. I keep calling him a spy, and he's not denying it. I don't know if either of us is joking, but at this point he could be a hired hitman and I probably wouldn't care. Not after experiencing the things that his mouth can do. My phone starts ringing again. Crap.

I dash for my bedroom and grab it off the nightstand. "I'm alive!" I say before she can mouth off. She glares at me through the phone. I was happy when Heath said he was going for a run. Not because I wanted him to leave, but now I'll get to have girl talk with her.

"I know you're alive. What I don't know is what you're doing over there." She smirks as her death glare slips away. "Okay, maybe I know who you're doing, I just don't know much else!"

I flop back on my bed. Jinx goes flying into the air with a loud meow but lands on his feet. "Sorry!" I tell him, not having noticed that he was on the bed. He blends in too well with my comforter. I should probably get more adult bedding if I'm going to continue doing sexy times in it. These poor kittens don't need to see or be a part of the things Heath and I do.

"Spill." Kimber lets out a sound like she's being tortured over there.

“Well, you know.” My face flushes. We’ve ‘you know’d’ it so many times I lost count.”

“You use protection?” she asks.

I almost drop the phone on my face. For once, I actually have a small amount of hand eye coordination and catch it before it hits me. I sit up.

“No,” I gasp out.

“Hmm.”

“Hmm?” I shoot back. “All you have is hmm?”

She looks like she’s thinking. “Just thinking maybe he’s serious with you or maybe he thinks you’re on the pill?”

Now my mind starts to race. Did he think I was on the pill? Does he just sleep with random women without condoms? Was he trying to knock me up? What would happen if I got knocked up? Would he leave again without notice? I have so many questions. Instead of this being fun girl talk, it’s taken a drastic turn into real life talk.

“He could be shooting blanks and isn’t worried about it.” I don’t know if Kimber is trying to help but that doesn’t help at all. A baby. My hand goes to my stomach; the thought of having one and not having one is equally as scary.

“Calm down.” Kimber’s voice drops to a soothing tone. My face must show it all. “It’s all going to be fine,” she tries again.

I shake my head no. It’s not going to be fine. I don’t know what it’s going to be.

I rise from my bed and drop my phone onto it before heading for my closet. “Pick me up!” Kimber demands.

“I’m getting dressed,” I shout as I dig through my closet for something to wear. I pull on my normal yoga pants and a shirt, then I pick the phone back up as I slip on shoes. “Should I say something?”

“He doesn’t strike me as the unsafe kind of man.” She’s right. He doesn’t. He’s meticulous about pretty much everything. So

if it's not a matter of him being unsafe, then he knew what he was doing.

I start to pace back and forth in my bedroom. Jinx returns to the bed to watch me.

"Lena. Calm down."

"This is new, but I need him." I swallow at how true that is. "He calms me. But now there's this huge possible problem and it's about him and now I don't know what to do!" I shout the last part. Oh God, I'm too attached to him. When Kimber left, it was hard. Really freaking hard, but I knew we'd be back together one day. That isn't true with Heath. He could leave me. Walk away without a backwards glance. My throat starts to constrict.

"Breathe. The man is in love with you, Lena. Think about it." I hear what she's saying but how could she know that? "Think about it. Do you really think you've been a topnotch spy, or you think he's been letting you have your fun because he cares about you?"

"I'm a good spy." I stop pacing to defend myself.

She raises one of her perfect eyebrows at me. "Man's been into you from the start or he would have gotten a restraining order."

"Hey—"

She keeps going.

"If you think the girl next door to you is stalking you and might be crazy, you don't sleep with her. Unless you're into it. He's into it. Really into you." She quirks a smile. "In more ways than one." She laughs at her own joke.

I fight not to laugh with her, but a snort comes from me.

"Go talk to him." She waves a hand at me. "Discuss it. Tell him your thoughts, and ask him his."

She's right. That's the adult, rational thing to do.

After hashing it out with her for a few more minutes, I say my goodbyes, then give myself a pep talk before I head over to

Heath's. My hand goes to my belly, and I can't help but smile. A baby. I think that would be so wonderful, which really isn't a rational thought. I don't even know what Heath actually does for a living. We don't live together or say I love you. I just stalk him and he gives me crazy pleasure that I'll never be able to live without again. This is just so fast, and now there could be a baby in the mix and instead of being mad, I'm ... tentatively happy? I am no longer a stalker. Now, I am a stage five clinger.

I pull my hair up and leave my bedroom, resolved to discuss it with him. I freeze when in my kitchen I see a man in all black. He's short. He's maybe only an inch taller than me, but he's built. Jinx is sitting on the counter, his back bowed, his hair on end. No one moves or says a word. My eyes flick to the gun in his hand. My heart drops. My hand goes to my stomach.

"I'm pregnant," I say. I could be?

The man starts to take a step toward me. He doesn't make it another foot before his body drops to the floor as blood splatters across the kitchen. I look down at my shirt that has tiny little red specks all over it now.

"I love this shirt," I say before Heath grabs a hold of my arm and pulls me from the kitchen.

"I'll get you a new one."

"It's vintage."

He stops to look down at me. "What am I going to do with you?" He shakes his head.

My heart drops. My mom used to say that, but hearing it come from him brings up that old hurt. I try and jerk from his hold, but he doesn't let me go. "Keep you safe, Lena. That's what I'm going to do," he says before he pulls me down the basement stairs.

HEATH

The call came when I was at my place brewing coffee. It was Sister Jezebel again, her voice laying out my assignment in clipped tones.

“Do you accept?” she asked.

I stared out the window at Lena’s house. She was probably still sleeping, her red hair tousled and her lips parted. If I didn’t come back to her, she would worry. Hell, she might even have a panic attack. I grabbed my coffee cup and realized my choice had already been made. The moment I saw her, the decision was done. I wanted a life with her. But to have that, I’d have to walk away from everything I’d ever known.

“Sister?”

“Yes,” she snapped back.

“I hereby tender my resignation.”

The line was quiet for a long time, until she said, “Are you certain, Brother? You know what this means?”

“I do.” I drank my coffee, singeing my tongue slightly. “I’m ready.”

“I’ll pass the word along. Please expect company within the hour. For what it’s worth, it’s been a pleasure working with you. Rest in peace, Brother.” The line went dead.

“They arrived quicker than I thought.” I pull Lena down into the dark basement.

“What? That guy?” She gives a half-hearted yank, trying to break my hold on her.

“I think they already suspected I was going to refuse this job.” I lead her to the brick foundation that would seem to be the end of the basement. But the small air duct in the brick is the tell—there’s a room behind it.

I open one of bricks, its façade swinging free and a keypad revealed beneath it.

“What is that?” She stops trying to free herself from my grip. “What—”

The locks click over after I enter the correct code, and the narrow door opens. The lights turn on, their glow giving me a view of Mildred’s formidable collection.

“Why is this here? What is this?” She stares open-mouthed at the armory. “And you!” She points at Jinx, who sits on the end of a rocket launcher. “This is how you get out, isn’t it?” He licks his paw, and the floorboards overhead creak. They’re swarming my house and hers, and it’s only a matter of time until they find us. We have to move.

“Stay close.” I swing the door shut and spin the locking mechanism before turning to the lighted display. “Take this.” I grab a small pistol, check that it’s loaded, and turn off the safety before handing it to her.

She grabs it, but then holds it as if it’s a piece of dirty laundry. “Why are there guns? Why?”

I snatch a holster from the wall and strap it around myself, then choose the weapons I like best while I explain. “I’m an assassin. Your grandmother? An assassin. Mrs. Winsten’s husband? He was an assassin. Most of the people who live on this street are either in the life or retired from it.”

“Wait, what?” She absentmindedly pets Jinx while shaking her head. “You’re saying words, but none of them go together. It’s all ridiculous.”

“We’re members of the Brotherhood.”

“But Mildred is a woman.” She holds up a finger like an Agatha Christie heroine.

“The Brotherhood has sisters, too, but the name is sort of a sexist relic.” I shrug and tuck some grenades onto a strap across my chest. “Anyway, that’s what I meant when I said I fix things.”

“You meant you *kill* people? Like a, a hitman?”

“Yes.” I shrug. “Some people need killing.”

“Uh huh...” She looks around, clearly trying to find a way out.

“We’re leaving there.” I point to the hidden door that leads to the small lawnmower shed in the backyard. I suppose Lena never noticed it since mowing the lawn isn’t her forte.

“Why was that man here? I thought you were the one who did the killing? Why was he—”

“Because I quit.” I check all my weapons as more creaking boards tell me there’s a host of killers overhead. I take her hand. “Because of you.”

“Me?”

I squeeze her fingers. “I want to be with you. Only you. We aren’t allowed to have love, to have a life. Love is a liability for men like me. But then I met you. Mildred entrusted me to take care of you, and I have, but there’s so much more I want to give you, to share with you.”

“So you quit.” She points up to the creaking boards. “Then why are they here?”

I kiss her fingers. “We aren’t allowed to quit. Not until they tell us we’re too old to be effective, though most of us don’t make it to the golden years.”

She narrows her eyes. “So if you can’t quit, what does that mean?”

“It means that there’s been a kill order placed for me. They’re coming to make good on it.”

“Who’s coming?” She’s clutching poor Jinx now.

“The Brotherhood.” I clear my throat. “But don’t worry. We’ll get out of this.”

“How?”

I heft the rocket launcher onto my shoulder. “I’m the best there is.”

“The best hitman?”

“Yes. Mildred trained me herself.”

“My grandma, the little old lady who lived here, trained you to be a deadly assassin?” Her incredulity is thick, but I don’t have any more time to explain. Pointing behind her, I say, “that case is heavy, but bulletproof. Stow Jinx inside.” I grab a bulletproof vest and toss it to her. “Wear this.”

She catches it with an *oomph* sound, then looks at me, her eyes wide. “Why aren’t you wearing a vest?”

I shove the door in the floor of the lawnmower shed open, then pull a remote from my pocket. “Tigress, I don’t need one.” With the click of my thumb, the bombs I set inside my house trigger all at once, and the resulting explosion is thunderous.

Lena winces. “Was that—”

“My house? Yeah.” I point to Jinx. “Hurry up. They’re coming.”

She seems to snap out of it and hastily shoves Jinx into the metal box, then holds out the vest.

“Over your head, yeah.” I shoot down two Brothers as they jump my back fence. Glancing back at her, I instruct, “There’s Velcro on the—” I shoot another assassin who was hiding in the oak branches along my fence line. He falls to the ground with a thud and a groan as I turn back to Lena. “Yep, you got it. Now tighten it up so the vest stays put.” A knife flies past my head, and I roll forward, prop on one knee and take out the killer who threw it. More converge on the shed. I back up and grab the rocket launcher, then take Jinx’s crate and help Lena up from the compartment. I slam the door shut. No need to let Mildred’s stash get confiscated.

“Where are we going to—”

I tackle her as a hail of bullets cuts through the wood siding, sending splinters flying all around us as slugs destroy the structure.

“Stay here and cover your ears.” I roll to the door, then jungle crawl out just far enough to flip onto my back, pull two grenades and throw one toward her house and the other into the neighbor’s yard.

Her back porch explodes as I cover her, and the other grenade lays down a heavy gray smoke. After a quick reload, I heft Jinx with one arm and the rocket launcher with the other. “We have to run.”

“Now?” She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

A piece of the shed’s roof falls off. We don’t have long before they mow us down. I drop Jinx, grab her vest, and yank her to me. Jinx complains as I kiss her hard, giving her my promise of protection and love.

“You can do this, tigress.” I press my forehead to hers, then snatch Jinx’s crate. “Follow me.”

Her hand on my back, I rush out into the billowing smoke. The world is a haze around us, but there are monsters lurking in the gloom. I fire two shots to my right and hear a body drop.

Hurrying her toward my garage, I kick open the side door and rush inside.

A shot whizzes past and embeds in the doorframe. I pull her to the ground and shoot under my car.

The assassin falls and reaches for his busted ankle, but a quick bullet to the face puts him out of his misery.

“In the car.” I pull her up and yank open the back door of my Mercedes.

She jumps in, and I toss a loudly meowing Jinx after her. Once she’s in, I slam the door and lock it.

“Get in!” She slams her hand down on the leather. “Come on!”

I press my palm to the bulletproof glass. “You’ll be safe here.”

“Hey, no!” She presses her palm to the glass. “You said we were going together.”

“We are.” I hoist the rocket launcher. “But I have a few more people who need killing.”

“Don’t leave me!” Her terrified yell cuts at my heart, but she’s safe here.

“I’m coming back. I promise.” I take a deep breath and do the scariest thing I’ve ever done. I tell her the truth. “I love you.”

With that, I bust through the garage door and out into the clearing smoke, aim the rocket launcher at her house that’s still teeming with assassins, and pull the trigger.

The rocket launches right as a Sister comes around the house, her gun out, and fires a shot straight to my chest.

LENA

I watch in horror as Heath gets hit with a bullet. His body jerks back, but he doesn't fall. The rocket launcher rolls off his shoulder and hits the ground. He staggers toward me as I scream.

Even as bits of the garage explode inward from gunshots, my mind goes back to his words. He loves me. That's what he'd said. It plays over and over in my mind. Out of everything happening right now all I can think about are him and those words. He loves me, and I know I love him. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm crazy obsessed with him.

He loves me and someone just shot him. Oh, *hell* no. No one is going to ruin this moment for me. I fling the door open and push my fear to the side. Heath told me to stay put, but he needs my help. The fear of losing him spurs me onward.

I raise the gun I have in my hand to shoot the tall blond woman who's trying to kill my man. Her hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail. Heath already has his gun raised too. They both stare at each other. I glance at him and see his shoulder is bleeding. He looks completely unfazed by it.

"Get back in the car, Lena," Heath orders. My hand shakes but I keep the gun on the woman.

"She can't kill us both," I breathe out. Somehow, my words don't tremble.

"Have you ever shot a gun, Lena?" the blonde asks.

In all black, she really does look like an assassin. There's no downplaying her. She seems deadly as hell. I bet Kimber could take her, though. I know I'm no match for her. Most days I can't even keep myself upright, but with my man hurt, I stand my ground. If I stand in this one spot and don't move, I should be fine.

"Jezebel." Heath's tone is filled with so much warning even I get a little scared for the woman. Again, crazy. I shouldn't be scared for her.

"No more 'Sister'?" She cocks her head at him.

"She's your sister?" I whisper yell. They look nothing alike. His own sister shot him? I thought I had family issues.

"No." Heath answers. "But I don't want to kill her either."

"She shot you," I remind him.

He still seems really unfazed about being shot. I think I'd be in a ball crying right now.

"You want me to shoot her?" I ask. Could I shoot her? My hand that was shaking suddenly stops. I stand up a little straighter. Yeah. I think I can. In fact, I'm starting to get more mad as the seconds tick by. Blondie is not taking my man from me. The sound of sirens start to draw near. We're running out of time.

"Do it," she says to Heath.

I let out a scream as he fires his gun. The shot hits her in the same place she hit him. She lets out a string of curses that would make a sailor second-guess his life choices. She doesn't drop her gun, but she does drop her arm holding it.

Heath reaches over and snags the gun out of my hand, then pushes me back into the still-open car door. He goes around the side, jumps in and takes off. I expect him to floor it with the tires spinning out but he pulls away smoothly and drives down our street. Cop cars fly past us as we calmly roll down the road. Not like two people who just survived a gun battle. Not as if Heath didn't blow up his own house with a rocket launcher only minutes before. You know, just another day in the neighborhood.

Mrs. Winsten waves as we pass, though I could swear she pockets a pistol inside her housecoat.

“Holy shit, the mean old lady is packing heat.”

“Virgie Winsten was never a player, but her husband was a deadly bastard. She picked up some tricks from him.” He turns off our street as more police cars screech past.

I gawk at him. All those months when I’d made up those stories, and none of them could even come close to this reality.

“You let her live.” I drop back in my seat and take a long breath. “The blonde.”

“I returned the favor. She had to look like she tried to kill me.” He shrugs his wounded shoulder without even wincing. “I don’t know if they’ll believe it.”

“Why?” I glare over at him. “You two have a thing?” Oh. There’s that jealousy thing of mine I get when it comes to him. He gave it to me. It’s his fault, I reason with myself. He only laughs as if I’m adorable. I knew I should have shot Blondie myself.

“I never miss. Maybe they’ll think I was distracted.” His eyes flick over to me, letting me know I’m the distraction.

“I think you should have killed her.” I turn and look out the window then fold my arms over my chest.

“My little tigress is out for blood now?”

I fight a smirk. “Blood!” I suddenly panic. “You’ve been shot. We need a hospital or an ambulance or something!”

“It’s fine. Through and through. Jezebel was always a good shot herself. She made it clean.”

“Maybe we should send her a fruit basket or some flowers as a thank you,” I mock.

Heath only laughs.

“Stop laughing. That has to hurt.” He has no concern for his bullet wound, though at least it doesn’t seem to be bleeding much anymore. The red stain on his shirt is pretty small, not that I know much about gunshot wounds.

I stare at the spot, wanting to do something to help it, but he's driving.

He reaches over and grabs my hand. "You can patch me up when we get to the plane."

"Plane? I've never been on a plane before," I admit. I wait for the fear to come, but it doesn't. Heath is here, and I am safe. Even though there was just an all-out assassin war in my backyard, I'm still safe and it's because of him. Oh, and my assassin grandmother. Let's not forget about good old Mildred's stockpile of guns, grenades, and rocket launchers.

"This is our first adventure." He squeezes my fingers. "We'll lie low for a few days while I get us new identities. Don't worry about anything."

I reach down and pinch my thigh. "Ahh!" I yelp. Heath grabs my wrist, pulling my hand away from myself before he gives me a look of what the hell?

"Just making sure this is real." I mean, come on. Secret rooms, rocket launchers, and assassins dropping dead all around me. This is so crazy that it couldn't be real, but it is. Wait until Kimber finds out about all this.

"I'll remind you how real this is when we get on the plane." He smirks.

"Stop smirking." My nipples go hard at the sexy look he gives me. "And stop thinking about sex. This isn't the time. I'm mad at you." Right. I should totally be mad at him. He kept all these things from me. But, then again, he didn't lie though. He'd even teased me about the spy stuff and part of me knew. I kept testing him in small ways.

"Even with my smirk and sexy thoughts, you're coming with me." He doesn't say it like a question but I answer him.

"Of course I am."

He pulls into a small airport I didn't know about. Not that I ventured out much to know about airports, but this isn't the big main one for our city. He pulls right up to a good-sized plane. Or at least I assume it's a good size.

“Grab our little brat.” He jerks a thumb at Jinx.

“Jinx! Oh, God!” I forgot about him for a second. He is safely in a bulletproof case but still I’m guessing he wants out. He’ll have to wait until we’re on the plane. I can’t risk him running off beforehand. He’s going to be extra bratty for the next week. I know it. My door opens as I grab Jinx’s box then follow Heath to the plane.

I wait for panic to come, but it doesn’t. His fingers tangle with mine as we go up the stairs together, and he greets the pilot with a firm nod.

“This isn’t what normal planes look like,” I mumble as we take a seat in these giant recliner things. I put Jinx in one of his own, opening the case so he can jump out. He quickly hops away and moves a few seats down from us. If looks could kill. He curls up with his face turned away from us. Giving us the ass. Yep, he’s a pissy kitty. Heath reaches over and buckles my seatbelt before sitting down and fastening his own.

I’m having trouble getting comfortable. I think the reality of everything is finally setting in. I feel restless and keep repositioning myself in my seat.

“Something wrong, tigress?” he asks.

Wrong? I’m not sure that’s the right word. Being with him never feels wrong. In fact, it’s when I feel the most right.

“We need a first aid kit.” I look to his shoulder.

He pulls his shirt over his head, tossing it away before leaning down and pulling something from beneath his seat and placing it in my lap. I open the box and see I have everything I might need or at least what I know how to use.

“We’re taking off.” I glance at the pilot, who is now standing next to us.

Heath gives him a nod.

“Where are we going?” I try to start tending to his shoulder, but I have no idea what I’m doing. Heath starts to help me.

“Here. I’ll show you how to do a neat stitch.” He doesn’t even wince when I dab alcohol on the neat bullet hole. “I’ll take you

anywhere you want to go. We can start over.”

I don't feel like I'm starting over as crazy as this all is. I actually feel like I'm just beginning.

“I love you,” I say. My eyes meet his. “I just want to go wherever you'll be.”

“Already there,” he tells me before leaning down and taking my mouth in a kiss. A kiss that says it all. I will never be without him again. He's made that more than clear today. Nothing could take him from me. Not even an army of assassins.

EPILOGUE I

HEATH

A few weeks later

*W*ater laps onshore in slow waves as I adjust Lena's umbrella.

"Hey." She wakes, her sweet smile perfect.

"The sun almost touched you." I try to sound stern, but her white bikini with the cherries all over it makes it especially difficult.

"You're here to save me from that mean old sun." She reaches up and strokes my cheek.

I kiss her palm. "More sunscreen?"

She groans. "You've already lathered me down twice. Aren't you tired of it?"

"Never." I lie beside her on the wide sunning bed.

"You get to have sun," she pouts.

"I tan." I shrug. "Besides, you're getting tan, too, just safely." I run my finger down her side and hook it into her bottoms.

"What are you up to?"

"I think you know." I grin and pounce on her.

"Heath!" she yelps as I pull her bikini bottoms down to her knees. "What if someone sees?"

"This is our beach." It's utterly deserted, the entire side of the Greek island deeded to us.

Keeping her legs together, I dart my tongue along her slit, savoring the taste of her, then pushing my tongue deeper.

“You are so bad.” She squeals and runs her fingers through my hair.

“You have no idea.” I delve further, then concentrate on her clit, rubbing the tip of my tongue against it in quick, short bursts.

She moans and tries to open her legs.

“No, tigress.” I lick up her mound. “You’re being punished.”

“Punished?”

“If I catch you almost getting burned again, I’ll redden your ass with my palm.”

She shivers as I go back to her pussy. She and I both know she loves it when I spank her, but for now, I torture her with my tongue until she’s moaning and fighting against my hold, trying to open her legs to find her release.

When I finally let up and yank her bottoms all the way off, I climb between her legs, pull out my cock, and thrust inside.

She arches and claws as I fuck her hard, giving her all of me just the way she likes. Ripping down her top, I suck her tits, giving special attention to each nipple as she pulls my hair and lifts her hips to meet mine.

If I don’t slow down, I’ll spend inside her, so I even out my strokes and take her mouth. Kissing her till she’s breathless, I pull back and stare down into her green eyes. More freckles have appeared on her cheeks since we’ve been in Greece, the sun pulling out her beauty even more.

“Happy?” I ask.

She leans up and kisses me, then nibbles my bottom lip. “Happiest girl in the world. I get to stalk you up close and personal now.” She moans as I grind against her.

“Feel free to keep an eye on me.” I kiss down to her breasts again, then worship them with my tongue.

“Oh, I will.” She peers down at me, her mouth open as I suck her nipple.

Angling my hips, I give her the friction she likes best, my body pressing against hers just right until her thighs shake, her eyes close, and she throws her head back as an orgasm tears through her. I push deep into her wet heat and let myself go, spilling inside her as her walls squeeze me tight. Fuck, I love this. For so long, I thought I’d never be able to truly live. I signed my life away to the Brotherhood when I was too young and too hungry. When I matured, I realized the trap I’d caught myself in. But I was resigned to stay in it, to do what I was told. Until Lena. Until my tigress came along and clawed up everything I thought I knew.

“I think you killed me.” She shivers as I pull out then grab her bottoms and slide them back up her legs.

“Never.” I kiss her. “Though I’m pretty sure I just slayed your pussy.”

She laughs and swats at me as movement catches my eye.

Jinx trots up, a small crab in his mouth. “Now here’s the real killer.” I pat his head as he struts around with his prize.

“Crabs aren’t real.” She shrugs.

“Aren’t real?”

“I mean, they don’t have feelings. Not like birds,” she reasons.

“So, Jinx is fine murdering crabs?”

“I guess some crabs need killing,” she echoes my words back to me, and I pull her close again, kissing her as she runs her nails down my biceps.

“Stop the canoodling!” A voice calls from the stairs behind us. “I’m an old lady, for Chrissakes!”

Lena snorts a laugh and lies back on the chair.

“I forgot my shades. Goddamnit.”

I wave as she approaches, profanity falling from her lips in a torrent. “Morning, Mildred.”

EPILOGUE II

LENA

Sometime later

“You better stop or Kimber is going to kill us both.” I try and push Heath’s hand away from my small baby bump, knowing exactly what he’s doing. His hand is drifting lower and lower and we both know where this will lead. I’ll end up on my back forgetting that I’m in my best friend’s super fancy condo about to eat all the food I can handle.

“She’ll never know.” Heath nibbles on me, not the least bit interested in food. He’s nuts. For one, not caring about the food, and two, he is already on Kimber’s shit list. Okay, not really on her shit list but kind of.

She never lets him live down the twenty-four hours she couldn’t locate me. Thank God I’d gotten her on the phone before she’d seen the news. I’d apparently died. That’s what had been reported anyway. She’d laid into Heath for a good thirty minutes. He’d promised her he’d take care of me and bring me to Paris as often as I wanted.

After a lot more soothing and promising, she could see how happy I was and relented. She took in everything rather easily. She also claims that she was the first one to suspect Heath of being a spy or a contract killer. I let her have that one.

“Almost done!” Kimber calls from the kitchen.

I wiggle, so full of excitement I’m about to burst with it. Not only am I getting Kimber food, but we’re finding out the sex of the baby. I’m dying to know if we’re having a little boy or girl. Grandma Mildred has said a boy while Heath and Kimber

insist that it's a girl. I hate to break it to them, but Grandma Mildred has a way about knowing and predicting things. Kimber may say she was onto Heath first, but Mildred claims she is truly the one who played matchmaker. I tend to believe her.

"I love you." Heath puts his finger under my chin, tilting my head to look up at him. I'm perched in his lap. I look into his eyes as I have many times before and see love shining in them.

"I love you too." My eyes fill with tears. This baby makes me happy cry all the time. I can't control it. I spring random leaks now. "We're having a baby." I utter the same words I've said five million times now.

"We are having a baby." He smiles against my mouth before kissing me.

Life is too good to be true. How a girl's world can change in such a short amount of time is almost unbelievable. Heath gave me something I didn't know I was looking for. He is my other half. He makes me feel normal for once in my life. I mean, look at me. I'm hopping on planes and doing things on a whim. As long as Heath is with me, I feel grounded. I'm sure a psychologist might not agree that this is healthy, but then again, I did marry a hitman so who really cares? A hitman that will do anything for me. He will keep me and our baby safe. He will give us the world if I asked for it. He already does without me having to say a word.

"Break it up, you two," Kimber says while placing two giant plates of food down.

I go straight for one of her pieces of coconut chicken and dip it into one of the many sauces she's prepared for us. I'm a sucker for dips, and my best friend is cooking it up for me. I moan at the wonderful sweet yet slightly spicy taste.

Heath's hand on my hip grips me a little firmer from the small sound. Oops. Guessing that wasn't helping his situation. I sneakily wiggle on him a little more, wanting what he has in his shorts. It's terrible but I can't help myself in that area either. I can't blame the pregnancy hormones, because I was like this before I got knocked up.

“Excuse us,” Heath abruptly says, lifting me from his lap and carrying me into the bathroom.

Kimber groans.

I should protest but I don't.

He puts me down, pulls down my shorts, bends me over the sink and plunges into me. His hard cock hits the spot that's been aching for him. I clutch the sink and look back at him.

“I can't keep up with your appetite, my little tigress. I didn't think it was possible that you'd need my cock more. Don't worry, I'm going to give it to you as much as you want.” His words have me backing myself up onto him. “That's right. Slide your wet pussy up and down me.”

I do exactly that. I take the pleasure I need. Heath puts his hand over my mouth as I come and cry out his name. He works himself in and out of me until I feel his warm release. “I love you, tigress,” he tells me again as he fixes my clothes and spins me around to face him. Those words make my heart flutter every time.

I give him one more kiss before we exit the bathroom and head back to Kimber's delicious meal.

“You're taking the heat this time from Kimber,” he says out of the side of his mouth before we reach her. My deadly assassin is afraid of Kimber's wrath—but not too afraid to pull me into the bathroom for a quickie.

Kimber knows what we've been up to.

As we approach, she looks up from the table. Before she can say anything, I stroke my baby bump. “I'm happy, Kimber. Happy with Heath and with you.”

She tries to maintain her frown but can't. With a wave of her hand, she says, “You're forgiven, horny preggo. Now sit down and eat all this food I made for you. Try to keep your damn hands off each other at least until after dessert.”

We all laugh because Heath and I both know what his dessert always is. Me. He's going to have to wait, though, because I'm so getting some of that chocolate cake I saw in the kitchen.

“It’s not me,” Heath chimes in from behind me.

I elbow him, but he laughs. I told Kimber the truth. I’m happy. Happier than I ever thought I could be. I have everything that a person could wish for. Heath may not have led the most innocent life before me, but he’s perfect in my world.

We sit down at the table.

“Open it already.” Kimber pushes the envelope toward me. I pick it up with shaking hands. “I have other news I want to share first.”

Kimber’s eyes narrow. “There can’t be anything left!” she snips more at Heath than me. She might be a little pissy she missed us getting married. She still wants that bachelorette party. I keep putting it off because, well, I don’t want anyone to die at the hands of my jealous husband.

“Well, out with it.” She crosses her arms.

I can’t contain my excitement. “We got a place here!”

Kimber’s whole face lights up. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! We’re going to have the baby here and not on the island.”

“Oh my God.” She comes flying out of her chair to hug me. I hold her tight as we share our moment. We’re both living our dreams. She graduated from culinary school and is already working at one of the hottest restaurants in Paris, and I’m getting a family.

“One of the best obstetricians in the world lives right here in Paris,” Heath says.

I roll my eyes. “No. We’re having the baby here because Kimber is here.”

“That too.” Heath shrugs. Kimber throws a shrimp at him.

“Hey. No wasting food!” I scold them both.

Sometimes these two really fight like brother and sister. It’s annoying and adorable.

“I think the penthouse is for sale.” Kimber points over her head.

“Not anymore,” Heath supplies.

“Oh, shit.” She laughs. “You didn’t come to play.”

“Not where Lena’s concerned.” He taps the envelope and gives me an expectant look. “Open the card, tigress.”

I do.

Tears blur my vision as I read the result.

Of course Mildred was right, not that it matters. Heath and I will be having plenty of babies. I’m sure we’ll have both boys and girls. It doesn’t matter which order they come in. All that matters is that we’re together. I know without a doubt that Heath will do anything to keep our family happy. I also know that Heath would kill whoever tried to take our joy from us ... unless Mildred got to them first.

HIS DEADLY DARLING

HIS DEADLY DARLING

MINK

Luke Knight thinks he can own me, can hurry me into a wedding and then into his bed. He seems to know everything about me. But he's missed the most important point—I'm *dastardly*. He thinks he's my one and only? Not a chance. But I like his estate and all his money, so I'll bide my time. I don't obsess over his good looks and the way he makes me feel. Not a bit. Once he's dead, I'll be more than happy to be the grieving widow ... on a yacht ... in the Seychelles ... drenched in diamonds.

Cassandra truly believes I'm the bad guy in her world. She's wrong. I can show her how much she means to me. It will take time and coaxing, but I'll prove to her our love is deep and true. If she tries to knife me a few times along the way, what of it? After all, a spirited woman is exactly what I need, and Cassandra Carlisle was made for me.

LUKE

“*A*re you certain this is the best course of action?” Clayton cracks his knuckles.

I adjust my tie and smooth a hand through my hair. “For me? Yes.”

“You don’t know her.”

I meet his gaze in the mirror.

“You don’t *really* know her,” he amends. “Stalking her from a distance is different than being married to her.”

“Did her father accept the payment?” I ask.

“Of course.” He sighs. “He jumped on the offer. Her mother did, too. They’re both in Cabo right now, noses full of coke and flashing their money around.”

I nod. “Good. I didn’t want them here for the wedding, but I would have allowed it if my bride insisted.”

“Your bride.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, the skull tattoo on the back of his hand on display. “This girl, Luke. This girl is trouble.”

“I know.” I ensure everything is perfect, then turn to my best man. “She’s a handful. She’s got a mind of her own. And she certainly doesn’t want to be my wife. But what she wants and what she needs are two different things.”

“You certain you’re ready for this?” He takes a deep breath as I knock the dust off his shoulder.

“I saw her. I knew.” I shrug. “The more I saw, the more I liked. She’s here, and she isn’t going anywhere.”

“How do you intend to get her to say her vows?”

“I’m glad you asked.” I whistle.

Gray walks in, a soft black animal crate in his hand.

“Don’t tell me that’s—”

“Her cat, yes.”

“That cat is almost as much of a monster as its owner.” Clayton scowls at the green eyes peering out at us. “It scratched the shit out of me that time you had me break into her house and deliver vase after vase of flowers that she promptly dumped out the back when she got home. And she didn’t stop there. She borrowed lighter fluid from her neighbor, soaked the flowers in it, then lit a match. That bi—”

I whirl on him, thunder rolling inside me at his near-insult to my bride.

He holds a hand up. “I apologize. Slip of the tongue.”

“I know you have objections.” I take a deep, calming breath. “I understand you have my best interests at heart, but Cassandra will be my wife. Nothing is going to change that fact. Not her reticence or your worry.”

“I know.” He glances at the cat. “But we don’t have to take the cat, right? I mean, it won’t be living with us at the estate, will it?”

I lean down and peer at the gray, fluffy ball of hate. “She’s temperamental, but she’s here to serve a purpose.”

She hisses at me, her fangs bared. Just like her owner. But what neither she nor my intended understand is that these shows of defiance only cause me to embed my claws deeper, to clutch what I want closer, to cage them and pet and stroke them until they love me. Because all they see is me. All they know is me. And this is how I will own their hearts.

“Can I at least be the one who threatens the cat?” Clayton asks hopefully.

“Of course. You’re my best man, after all.”

He rolls his shoulders and straightens his tux. “Good.”

“I’m ready.” I turn toward the door.

Javier hurries out the door, and music begins to play in the small church on the edge of my estate. It’s an old building, dating from the 1800s. My parents were married here, though their ceremony was a bit more ... agreeable.

But Cassandra’s refusals won’t matter once my ring is on her finger. She will agree to marry me before God and the priest, and then she will be mine. Her fury? Mine. Her soul? Mine. But what she doesn’t understand—and certainly doesn’t want—is all of me. That’s what she will get the moment I claim her mouth and seal our iron bond.

Like the cat, she doesn’t feel my love. Like the cat, she wants to shred my fucking face. But also like the cat, she will come to love me. And eventually, Cassandra will sit in my lap as I stroke her, take her treats from my hand, and curl up beside me at night, satisfied and warm in the inevitability of my embrace.

CASSANDRA

“*I* will not put up with this for one more second!” I shout to no one because I’m locked in a room alone. I pop another grape into my mouth. It goes perfectly with whatever this cheese is. I need to find out because I’ll be wanting more. I’m always a sucker for a fruit and cheese board. If there’s one on the menu, it’s a guarantee that I’ll order it. I’m trying to stay angry but the food isn’t helping.

“I know you’re out there!” This time my shouting isn’t so loud with my mouth full of food.

I pick up the sharp charcuterie knife and eye the wedding dress hanging on the rack, waiting there for me to put it on. It’s beautiful. I grip the knife tight in my hold. I should shred it, then I’ll have nothing to get married in. If I don’t have a dress, then I can’t get married. Problem solved. I raise the knife, resolved to destroy the gown, and even do a few practice swipes. But the crystals on the bodice sparkle, each little shimmer begging for its life.

“It’s too pretty to ruin.” I drop down into the comfy chair, but keep the knife in my hand. I might need it later.

The fact is, I love this dress. I’d pinned it on my Pinterest board and gushed about it in the post. I mean, I never wanted to get married, of course. Men are, at their core, terrifying and cruel creatures as far as I can tell, and unfortunately, I’m not into women. Despite no wedding bells in my future, I thought this gown was gorgeous. It’s creepy that it’s here, waiting for me to put it on.

I glare at the gorgeous fabric. But I bet if I cut it up, Mr. Knight would just have another delivered. The bastard. Wait. No. I call him Luke. Everyone else calls him Mr. Knight. It makes it so much worse that his last name is Knight. Because believe me, he's not one in shining armor. I'd think his last name was cool if I didn't want to punch him. Luke doesn't seem to be the type that appreciates being defied. He's in for a real treat, then. I smile for the first time since his goons locked me in here. I plan to give Luke a run for his money.

He won't get any respect from me by calling him by his last name. I don't care how many times my father corrected me on it. Why would I give a damn about what he wants to be called? He bought me from my father like a piece of property. My father sold me, just up and handed me off in exchange for the cliché briefcase full of cash. Those jerks agreed upon a price and exchanged money for me. As easy as if they were at the grocery store, buying a gallon of milk. I was a transaction, which pisses me off more than the pretty dress or the tasty cheese. It's ridiculous and outrageous and I will be finding a way out of here once I finish my food.

I should've known this would happen. Luke always gets what he wants. My own father warned me of that. I laughed and tossed out all of the flowers he sent me. I want nothing to do with a man that associates with my father. Birds of a feather and all that jazz. I saw how my father treated my mother. She put up with it, too. I didn't want that life or a marriage like theirs. I've been doing my best to fight back the only way I know how, but that doesn't seem to be getting me anywhere.

My fingers stroke the knife hilt. They'll have to hold me down to get that dress on me. If they think I'm going to get all dolled up and walk down the aisle, they have another thing coming. My father might have handed me over like property, but I'm not going anywhere. I couldn't even if I wanted to because the door is locked. They can't keep me locked in here forever, though. Not if they need an *I do*. They'll have to pry those words past my lips with pliers.

The door swings open a moment later. I have to control myself from popping up from my chair and making a run for it. I'm

not going to get anywhere right now. I look back toward the cheese board and pretend Clayton hasn't entered the room. He's Luke's right hand man.

He says nothing. I can see out of the corner of my eye that he's just standing there. Keeping up the ruse, I eat another piece of cheese and moan around it about how good it is and too bad Luke's goons aren't entitled to any.

He stays silent, his hands clasped in front of him. Unruffled. I didn't think I could be any more pissed off. I was wrong. I break. My self-control is the worst. "You could've knocked. What if I had been naked?" I pick up another grape, popping it into my mouth and trying to play it cool. I'm also trying to hide the knife. I don't want to take Clayton down, but I will if I have to. I think I will, anyway. I could do it. I swallow the grape and choke a little before it goes down.

"If I'd seen you naked, Mr. Knight would likely have my eyes removed from my head."

I turn to look at him with my face scrunched in disgust. Gross. "I'm eating grapes and you're over here talking about eyeballs? Yick." That's a front. It bothers me because I don't think Clayton is joking. I've heard things about Luke. Who knows what's rumor or half-truths and whole-truth? Most of the tales came from my own father, and isn't he the biggest liar of them all? I'd laugh if it didn't hurt. See, I thought I was off to some fancy college where I'd be getting my own room and board. I could even take Ms. Kittles with me.

I was down with not being under my parents' roof anymore. Sign me up. I'd still be under their thumb because I don't have a penny to my name, but I thought college would be a start to my freedom. I was getting the hell out of Dodge and nothing had given me more joy. I'd be going into the world of normal people. I'm pretty sure I'm one of them. Yet, the way my fingers wrap so easily around the knife makes me wonder if I'm wrong. Things seem to be changing very quickly for me. I'd been dropped off here with my bag and my hopes of getting away utterly dashed. I was shoved into this room with my bags and all.

It's clear there will be no college.

Hi, I'm Cassandra, and I am a dummy.

I'd never even asked the name of the school. I was *that* excited to get out of my house. I thought maybe my father had done that college admissions cheating scandal thing. In no time, I'd be rubbing elbows with Aunt Becky's daughter. But no. He couldn't even cheat me into somewhere right. I probably should've asked for a course schedule—or, you know, a college name—but I was so used to going along with what I was told that I assumed everything was being taken care of. You know what they say about assuming? Yeah, I won't make that mistake again.

Clayton's glower has only deepened as I've been going over my foolishness in my mind. "I think we both know you're not getting into that dress without a little help."

That would scare the crap out of me if I thought he was going to forcefully put me into it. After the comment about his eyes being carved out of his head if he saw me naked, I don't think that's the case.

My heart starts to race as Clayton reaches into his jacket. Have I gone too far? Sassed him too much? Does he know about the knife? I swallow, still trying to keep my composure. If I've learned anything from Ms. Kittles, it's to always play it cool. Never let the enemy know you fear them. You strike when they least expect it. Not that I've ever had to strike but I've seen Ms. Kittles do it on a few spiders. She's so brave, out there dueling with arachnids and trying to save my life.

Clayton pulls out his phone, not a gun. I release the breath I'm holding as he takes a few steps toward me, and I see what's on the screen.

My stomach drops as I see the familiar whiskers and beguiling green eyes. I want to rip Clayton apart. "You give me my little precious furry baby!"

"Of course," Clayton agrees.

Oh. That tone actually worked. I should try it more often. "Good, then, in that case"—I clear my throat—"bring her to

me right n—”

“Of course I’ll give you the cat *after you say ‘I do.’*”

Okay, so the tone didn’t work at all.

“Give me my cat.” I put my hands on my hips.

“She’s waiting for you back in your new home.”

“Take me there now.” I stomp.

He crosses his arms, hiding my Ms. Kittles from me. “I’m sorry. Mr. Knight doesn’t allow random women in his home. You must be employed or family.”

“No trail of hookers and girlfriends. Wait, mistresses! That’s what Mom calls them.” I snap my fingers as I remember.

The thought of Luke’s mistresses sours my stomach even though I shouldn’t care. Still, it would totally piss me off if he’s been hooking up with other women for the whole time he’s been trying to get me to go out with him. These thoughts are ridiculous and irrational on my part. Yeah. I’m so not going to fit in with the normal people of the world. But I can fake it!

“Mistresses? Don’t be distasteful.” He shakes his head at me like a father scolding his child for cursing.

“*I’m* being distasteful?” I scream. I’ve been kidnapped. Sold off.

“Please calm down. If Mr. Knight hears you shouting he will come down here.” He puts his phone back into his pocket.

“I don’t want to see his face,” I mumble. His handsome stupid face that has haunted all of my dreams for the past six months since he entered my life. I. Hate. Him.

“You shouldn’t see the groom before the wedding. Isn’t that tradition or some shit?”

I bite the inside of my cheek not to laugh and remind myself I don’t like Clayton.

“Ms. Kittles get you?” I ask and eye his scratched hands. That a girl.

“She’s a menace.” Clayton’s face grows serious.

“What do you think I’ll be?” I tilt my head. If there’s one thing I know, Clayton doesn’t mess around with the safety of Mr. Luke Knight. “I could end up killing your precious leader in his sleep.”

“I could kill your cat,” he tosses back. I gasp.

“That’s just messed up. I can’t believe you said that to me.” I take a step back from him.

He blinks. “You just threatened to kill a person.”

I bat my hand like that’s no big deal but quickly drop it behind my back because it’s the one with the knife. “I’d be doing the world a favor there.” Luke is too handsome to be roaming around anyway. Plus, if half the things I’ve heard about him are true ... Again, doing the world a favor. Ms. Kittles is needed in this world. She is the number one spider killer. Ms. Kittles is the Clayton of my life. I get why Luke has this taciturn jerk by his side.

Clayton lets out a long-suffering sigh. “If you want your cat you’ll put on the dress and walk down the aisle.”

“Fine.” I tilt my chin up.

“Fine?” he repeats, clearly not believing me.

What choice do I have? The first step is getting out of this room and then getting to Ms. Kittles. I’ll marry Luke—like sort of fake marry him, even though the vows and the church and the priest are very real ... beside the point. Anyway, I’ll then go back to his place where I’ll get my cat and make my escape.

“Bring in the makeup and hair people and all that crap.” If I’m going to do this, I might as well look good while I do. Show Luke what he won’t be getting at the end of this night. “Oh, and a lawyer.”

“Lawyer?” Clayton asks.

“Prenup or whatever. I know how these things work.”

“There will be no divorce, hence no prenup.” He shrugs, but his face doesn’t agree with his words. He’s just as against this marriage as I am.

“Stop giving me more reasons to kill your boss man,” I taunt.

Clayton’s jaw tightens. “I don’t care for your jokes.”

“Sure, jokes. I got lots of those.” I stroll back over to the chair and plop down into it. “Send in the crew.” Really, I’m stalling ‘cause I’m kind of freaking out on the inside. A small seed has sprouted in my mind. What if I *did* kill my husband? His kingdom would then be mine. I’d be free. I run my finger along the knife hilt.

“I’ll send them in,” Clayton says and turns to leave.

I won’t be running. He has my cat. The truth was the door was ajar the entire time we were talking. Even if I had Ms. Kittles where would I go? My parents are gone, and my only friend is a cat. I’ve been kept in what one could call an ivory tower my whole life. I’m not sure I know how to function in the real world with all the normal people I was so eager to join.

“Ouch.” I let the knife go and lift my hand. I cut my palm. It’s only a scratch, but if I plan to kill my husband, I might want to get a little better with my weapons. Women in two tons of makeup and fancy clothes burst into the room, their voices high and busy.

“Make me look good,” I tell them. “Want to show my husband what he’ll never have.”

They look at me confused. The only blood that will be shed in our marital bed tonight will be *his*. My virtue isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. Especially not to the likes of Luke. Maybe I’ve fantasized about him a few times. So, what? That doesn’t mean I’ll let him touch me.

The only touch he’ll get tonight will be the sharp kind.

LUKE

“**S**he has a knife.” Clayton takes position next to me at the front of the small church.

“Come again?”

“She took the knife from the charcuterie tray. Probably has it stashed on her body somewhere.” He checks to make sure the rings are in his pocket.

I smile. “I’ll enjoy stripping her bit by bit until I discover it.” I nod at the priest.

He gives me a nervous smile. “My son, are you certain this is what you want?”

“We’re all sinners here, Father, and I’m not the confessional sort.” I’m paying him to do a job, not offer counsel.

He takes the hint and backs away to the polished stone pulpit.

“How did she enjoy the food?” I took great care in selecting her snacks. She’s quite particular about them, after all. I ordered her favorite grapes and a cheese I knew she’d favor, then set up the tray myself to make sure it was perfect for her.

“She was eating like a starving woman.” Clayton almost smiles. Almost, but not quite.

“Good.” I take pleasure in the little details like that, knowing that she enjoyed something I chose just for her. “And how about the cat?”

“She didn’t like that so much.” He shrugs. “But she’s going to play along. I left the door cracked while I was speaking with

her. She didn't make a move."

"She wouldn't have gotten far. Only a fool would try to run right now. She's surrounded, trapped on my estate, and watched at every moment." All the same, my bride is cunning. I've known that since the first moment I saw Cassandra. She was sitting at her parents' table, her cat at her feet. During the course of dinner, she managed to sneak that cat most of her meat portion without breaking conversation or anyone else seeing. A small thing, of course, but a rebellious streak and a devious mind are the primary reasons I chose her.

"No one else is coming." Clayton checks his pocket for the rings again. "We're ready to go as soon as she gets out here."

Javier stands at the rear of the chapel, and my other men are scattered around the property. I've left nothing undone, no door unguarded. Cassandra will be mine tonight.

"Did she like the undergarments I sent her?"

Clayton shrugs. "I didn't ask to see any of that."

"Good." I peer over at him.

"You testing me now?" He bristles.

"Cassandra is a very attractive woman. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for others to covet her."

"Maybe others, but not me." He reaches inside his coat and pulls out a blade. "I'll swear to you right now on my blood that I will never so much as lay a finger on—"

"I know." I flick my hand at his knife. "No need for bloodshed."

He stows it, but his countenance is stormy.

Regret filters through me. It seems I can't think straight when it comes to Cassandra. That's been true since that first night I arrived to discuss the diamond business with her father. And it's still the case today. "I'm sorry, old friend." I truly am. "Perhaps wedding day jitters are real after all."

His eyes open a little wider. I suppose it's not often that I apologize.

He shrugs it off. “I understand.” Then he hesitates. “I mean, I don’t understand, and I never have, but maybe this sort of thing is just something you have to feel?”

“One day, Clayton, you’ll get the same feeling.”

“With the amount of trouble your bride’s been—and I can assure you is *going* to be—I hope that day is far off.” He finally smiles.

I match it. “She’s made for me. You’ll see.”

“I trust you.” He doesn’t sound too certain, but it doesn’t matter.

My heart recognized her, and that was that.

A commotion at the back has Clayton on alert, but I hold him back. “It’s her. Relax.”

He rolls his shoulders. “Fine.”

No music, no guests, nothing except the bare necessities for this affair. After all, she’s about to be one of the richest women in the world. I can’t have someone trying to kill me and take her, can I? No, it’s better for us to be together with only my trusted associates.

Javier opens the creaky door to the vestibule, then turns and gives me a curt nod. “She’s ready.”

My heart seems to swell as I take a deep breath and stare at the rough wooden doors.

“Nervous?” Clayton switches into best-man mode with surprising ease.

“Not a bit.” I want this. Just like I’ve known my whole life when I wanted something, I know that I was made for this woman. She’s young, and rash, and possibly violent, but all of that only makes me want to tame her, to make her my darling one with claws that scratch anyone who dares cross us.

When she steps through, I can’t even find the words. She wears her favorite gown as if the designer had her in mind when she created it. A plunging neckline, tight bodice, and

dramatic skirt. My Cassandra would shine in burlap, but this gown, *this* gown—it was made for her.

She stomps down the aisle in adorable fashion, coming at me like a hurricane. The ire in each step goes straight to my cock, and I'm hard and ready for her, wanting her to work out every bit of aggression as I fuck her raw. Oh, how my darling will scratch and bite when I make her come.

"Here I am." She holds her hands out to her sides in a 'look at me' pose, then thumbs her nose at the priest. "Let's get this unholy matrimony on the road."

Her blue eyes are brilliant, her skin luminous, the Cupid's bow of her pout perfect. She is a furious beauty. My opposite, yet also my match.

"I'm serious." She puts one hand on her hip. "I want this over with. This guy is my husband, okay?" Then with an overdone curtsy, she says, "I do."

"I haven't, ah ... I haven't said the—"

"It's all right, Father. You may proceed." I take her arm and pull her to my side as she fumes. Pressing my lips to her ear, I remind her, "Ms. Kittles wouldn't appreciate your little performance. I'd hate for her to get declawed. I hear that cruel practice is rather painful and quite permanent."

She gasps. "You wouldn't dare."

I stare her down with the same cold calculation that runs in my family. "Oh, but I would." No, I wouldn't, simply because it would hurt my Cassandra, but sometimes a strong hand is needed to keep a wild one like her in check. I'll give her plenty of leash once the ceremony is over, once she's truly mine.

The priest drones on, the words rote, as my vixen fidgets but behaves for the most part. I keep her hand in mine, feeling the softness of her.

When she comes to her vows, she stubbornly presses her lips together.

“Come now, don’t be foolish,” I coax as Clayton shows her live video of Ms. Kittles.

She wrinkles her nose, but submits. “Fine. I’ll marry you under protest.”

The priest dodders toward me. “I’m afraid if she’s protesting, I can’t—”

I turn to my best man. “Clayton, instruct Gray to remove the cat’s tail.”

“No!” She scowls, her gaze absolute murder. “I will marry him. Love, honor, cherish, everything you said. And not under protest. I’m willing.”

The priest nods and steps back to his place. “Well, in that case, Mr. Knight, repeat after me. I—”

I cut through his words and say my vows with perfect ease.

His gray eyebrows lift.

I don’t know why he’s surprised. I calculate everything, including the quickest way to get what I want.

“The, ah, rings?” he broaches.

Clayton hands them over.

I slide hers on to her finger, the gems from my very own mines sparkling beautifully, then I hand her my simpler platinum band and offer her my hand.

She pauses for a moment, admiring her ring, her eyes widening. Did she think I’d skimp on her gift? Never.

Remembering herself, her eyes narrow as she slides my ring on. Then, quick as an adder, she swings her hidden blade at my throat.

I catch her wrist and kiss it, then squeeze until she drops the knife with a cry. Clayton is glowering at my side, but picks up the knife without a word.

She growls in frustration and yanks her hand back. “I’ll get you.”

“Of course, my little vixen.” I pull her into my arms. “You’ve already got me.” I kiss her hard on the mouth, sealing our vows and leaving no question of my claim on her, body and soul.

CASSANDRA

I've never hated anyone more than I hate this man who is now my husband. He captures my mouth with his, silencing any protest that I might have.

We might have exchanged vows to honor, love, and respect one another, but I will end him. He has no idea what he's signed up for. If the circumstances were different, I can't deny that this would have been my dream wedding. Everything is perfect. My dress fits me like a glove and looks more beautiful on me than I ever could have imagined. Luke actually caught me off guard with his ring selection. It's stunning, to say the least. The weight of it is heavy on my finger.

I'll likely still wear it after he's dead. A small token of remembrance. I shall play the widow well with Ms. Kittles at my side, her claws still in her cute tiny paws.

My captor deepens the kiss. A small moan escapes me. I don't know where it came from. I lean into him because the heels are a touch higher than I'm used to. My fingers dig into my captor's tux jacket. Yes, that's what I'm calling this man that I'm married to now—my captor. I will never refer to him as my husband. He'd enjoy that all too much. He's won this round, but he can't win them all. I can be patient.

Maybe I'm enjoying our kiss a little too much. His fingers dig into my hair, and he tilts my head back to give him a better angle to deepen the kiss. This time it's him that groans, the sound rolling through me. I have to fight a whimper of need that flashes through my body. It's unwanted, just like my

husband. Damnit, I mean my *captor*! That thought brings me back to reality. This isn't some passionate first kiss between lovers. He is the enemy. I strike as Ms. Kittles would.

I bite down on his lip. He jerks against me, pulling me into him more. My feet leave the ground, and I gasp as his hard cock digs into me, causing me to let go of his lip.

"Careful, wife. I can bite too." His tongue comes out, and he licks the broken skin.

The small throb between my legs grows.

"If you behave, I might even let you pick where I bite you."

I narrow my eyes on him, ready to unleash hell, but I stop short when the priest clears his throat. Luke smirks as I close my mouth.

"The car ready?" He places me back on my feet but doesn't let me go.

"Already out front," Clayton confirms.

It's then I realize it's me that hasn't let go of *him*. My fingers are still digging into his suit. I drop my hands away quickly and try to take a step back, but he only swings us around, tucking me into his side. He keeps me close. He's smart, I'll give him that.

"I'm sure my wife is ready to see our home." He leads me down the aisle I'd only just stomped down.

I want to say no, that I don't want to see it, but I kind of do. I wasn't shocked when Clayton told me that women didn't come and go from Luke's home. I've heard his estate is like Fort Knox. No one gets invited in. Parties are never thrown there, and he doesn't show off his vast wealth. He has enough money and power to keep his affairs private. After all, his mines produce the high-end stones and metals sought after by the finest jewelers in the world. Getting invited to Luke Knight's home is a treat to most. It means you're in his inner circle, but for some, it means death. Those are the only times he invites people in—love or murder. Who knows in the end how my invite will turn out? Hopefully, it's with me and Ms. Kittles living in his mansion and Luke buried beneath our feet.

I'm sure he keeps some condo for his mistresses. I know my father does, but to be fair, Luke didn't have a wife and kids. Well, not until now. But will he change his assuredly philandering ways just because he thinks he's bagged me? Again, my stomach sours. I welcome the feeling. It cools the weird throb between my legs that I'll never admit to having.

He opens the church door for me.

"Thank you." I raise my chin.

"Thank you?" he asks as he leads me down the stairs to the waiting car. He motions with his hand for the driver to get back behind the wheel. Luke opens the car door for me himself.

"It was stupid of me to try and kill you," I admit with a shrug. "I mean, before we said 'I do.' But now what's yours is mine." I smirk as I drop down into the car. "Open season."

"Yes, what's mine is yours," he responds as he leans down into the car. My mouth stupidly parts, thinking he's about to kiss me again. His fingers dig into my hair again as he tilts my head back. I let out a small whimper. His hold on me is quickly becoming my Achilles' heel. My body keeps lighting up at his touch. Why would I ready myself for such a thing?

I hate his kiss and his touch, I have to remind my body. I hate everything about him.

"And what's yours is now *mine*." He drags his nose along the column of my neck as he says the words before kissing me below my ear. "I'll be taking what's mine. I'll be the only one that ever takes it."

Again, I'm cut off before I can say something as he backs away and slams the car door. I sit there in shock for a second. A warm feeling coats my skin. I shake it off when he gets in the other side and pulls me to him, tucking me under his arm as the car takes off.

I should fight him but what's the point? I'd end up pinned to the floor of the town car. Holy shit. I clench my thighs together at that thought. That is definitely not happening. What is wrong with me?

“You put something in my food!” I shout. That’s it. I’ve been drugged. Of course that’s what’s going on here. This afternoon while getting my hair and makeup done, I thought of all kinds of things I could put in his food to kill him. Just in case my knife plan didn’t work. It hadn’t, so now I need to try something else, but what if he beat me to it?

“You think I drugged you?” He smiles as if the thought is laughable. “Your body already knows what it wants. I don’t need to drug it.” He reaches out and tucks a loose piece of hair behind my ear. I bat at his hand and try to get him with my nails.

He only smiles bigger. I should have thought of sharper nails when they gave me that manicure. Damn it. I stop to look at my hand and the giant ring. This thing really is a weapon within itself. I’d hit him with it but, like the dress, I don’t want to ruin it. I drop my hand.

“You going to get me declawed, too?” I snip, feeling defeated as I fall back into my seat.

He doesn’t say anything. The car grows quiet. I shift in my seat.

“Cassandra.” Luke says my name softly.

I ignore him, wondering if it will bother him. I tried it on my parents many times growing up. They never noticed.

“Wife,” he says, a bit more strongly.

I turn my head to look away from him. What is wrong with me? I should know better, but I’m doing it. My mom always said I was a brat.

“One day I’ll call your name, and you’ll run to me.” His voice is a sexy rumble, the promise of pleasure and pain mixed.

“Ah. You got jokes.” I let out a humorless laugh.

“Know this.”

I can’t stop myself from turning my head and meeting his gaze.

“I’ll never harm a hair on your head.” He says it with the same finality as his vow.

“But not Ms. Kittles, right? You’d hurt her to get at me,” I remind him.

“It won’t have to come to that, will it, vixen?” He picks up my hand. The same one I tried to smack him away with. He kisses the small cut I gave myself with the knife. “You’re the only one who can hurt yourself or Ms. Kittles. That fate lies in your hands.” He kisses the mark again before tangling his fingers with mine.

He’s right. I might not have all the control here, but I do have some power. I don’t know why Luke Knight is so intent on making me his, but I need to be better with the power that I do have over him. I see it now. He really shouldn’t have given it to me. I’ll only use it against him. My eyes stay locked with his, and my heart does a funny flutter. I swallow, not sure what to do with everything I’m feeling.

The car is silent, the driver looking straight ahead as we wind down a dark lane. I close my eyes and try to calm myself.

“Welcome home.” Luke takes my hand as he opens his car door. I hadn’t realized we’d stopped moving. He pulls me from the car. My head tilts back, taking in his home. Our home. The one that will be all mine after I kill him.

I smile. I’ve always wanted a castle.

LUKE

“No offense, Mr. Knight.” Selene slurs her words only slightly. “But Cassandra isn’t the girl for you.”

“How so?” I hold my whiskey but don’t drink it.

“She’s a little...” She wobbles her hand to indicate ‘crazy’ or something similar. “She’s never listened to me. And is generally a brat.” Selene sits next to me, alcohol heavy on her breath. “But if you’re looking for company and willing to pay, then—”

“Tell me more about Cassandra.” I look at her father, the man a mix of adderall and cocaine.

“She’s willful, smart-mouthed, and violent.” He runs a hand through his thinning hair. “Look, Mr. Knight, nothing would make me happier than for you to take her off our hands, but I don’t want this to come back on me. If you were anyone else, I’d wrap her up in a bow and deliver her to your door. But you—” He clears his throat. “You’re different.”

Because I could have his entire family killed, their bodies buried on one of my many properties, and no one would be the wiser. Yes, I realize.

“Violent?” I ask. “What has she done that’s violent?”

Her mother gives up the seduction attempt and plops down in an armchair across from me. “We tried to get her to learn piano.” She takes another swig. “She pulled a piano wire free from her grand and threatened to use it to strangle her teacher. He never came back.”

“Let’s not forget the French tutor.” Her father shakes his head. “Best damned French teacher in the city. She stabbed him in the leg with her pencil.” He grabs one of the fire irons from its stand. “She has no care for what we give her, for the sacrifices we made. We’ve even had to sell some family heirlooms to keep this house for her, to make sure everything is nice.” He proffers the iron. “These are antique, if you’re interested.”

I know why they’ve sold heirlooms. Not for their daughter, but to maintain the façade of being the wealthy Carlisle family. But they’ve fallen into drugs, alcohol, and disrepair. The family name will end with them.

“Put that down,” Selene hisses at him, then turns back to me. “She’s a problem for us, and she’d be an even bigger problem for you.”

“I see.” I steeple my fingers. “And you’ve kept her here even though she’s twenty? She has no interest in college?”

Selene waves her drink, spilling a little on the sofa. “She’s not college material. I mean, she’s smart. Loves to read. Always scored high on whatever tests the eggheads gave her. What would a girl like her do in college? I mean, I never went to college and look at me.” She smiles and reveals the lipstick smeared on her teeth. “Cassandra was supposed to be married off and getting her MRS degree, but she’s damaged goods. No man wants a crazy woman for a wife. What’s that book about that? He keeps her in the attic.”

“Jane Eyre,” I say.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Doesn’t ring a bell.” She barrels on, “But Cassandra, I’m sorry to say, will never amount to anything. If you want some fun with her—” She taps her finger on her chin. “How much would you offer for a night with her?”

I bristle, but try to keep my voice calm. “Excuse me?”

“She’s a virgin. We know that for sure. If you wanted to be the man to pop her cherry, we’d entertain an offer.”

“And she wouldn’t mind her virginity being sold like that?” My grip tightens on my glass.

“We can drug her, hold her down, whatever you want, as long as the price is right.” She licks her lips with lascivious hunger.

My glass shatters as my blood boils and it takes every ounce of control I possess not to strike them both down and beat them to death with one of their antique fire irons.

Selene pops up. “Oh no, let me help.”

“I’m fine.” I deposit the broken glass on the side table and pull out my handkerchief to wrap my bleeding hand. Rising, I say, “I understand the Carlisle family has fallen on hard times.”

Selene’s overdone face cracks as she adopts a self-pitying look. “Marty made some bad business choices.”

“This again?” Cassandra’s father glares at the fire.

“I will send for Cassandra to—”

“To fuck her?” Selene smiles.

“Don’t interrupt me.” My tone is level, but deadly.

She steps back and lowers her gaze. “Sorry.”

“As I was saying, I will send for Cassandra within the week. Have her ready. She will be my bride and live with me at my estate. If she chooses to see you, she may. If she chooses not to, then you will honor her request.” I turn to leave.

“The money?” Selene follows me into the posh-for-1976 foyer.

“I’ll wire a generous sum when I come to claim her. What you do after that is up to you.”



I scoop her into my arms. She protests, her little hands forming into fists and pummeling me.

“It’s tradition.” I carry her over the threshold, then set her on her feet. “Welcome home.”

“How many people live here?” Cassandra steps away from me, her gaze going all over the foyer, down the wings, and

straight ahead through the glass windows that give a view of the lighted pool.

“You and me. Eventually our children.”

She scoffs. “Not happening.”

“Maybe not right away, no.” I won’t pressure her into children, though I must admit I want them. But those decisions are ones we’ll make together.

“Never.”

I let her have the last word. For now. “My associates stay in the guest house behind the pool.”

“You mean your goons?”

“A man like me has many enemies.” I shrug. “Money and success breed jealousy, and there’s always someone out there who wants what I have.” I give her a long look. “It will be even worse now that I have you.”

“Don’t worry.” She grins. “You won’t have me for long. You’ll be dead.”

“You still plan on murdering me?” I don’t doubt she’ll try. But I also felt the way she clutched me, the way she responded to my kiss, her body heating as her tongue danced with mine. Her mind and body are in a disagreement, but I’ve been quite adept at dividing and conquering my entire life.

“Yep, you’re a dead man walking.” She struts forward, her hands on her hips. “But I’ll like living here without you. I’ll keep it nice, so don’t fret about that.”

“Thank you.” I gesture toward the stairs. “Would you like to see our room?”

“Not a chance.” She scowls.

It’s an act. I can see her so clearly, the dark heart that struggles for freedom. She’s been caged until now, her mind and body encased in the life her parents created for her. I want to set her free, but she has to give me a chance before that will happen. But I can be patient ... and cunning.

“Well, then.” I stride toward the curving staircase. “I suppose I’ll see how Ms. Kittles is faring without you.”

“She’s up there?” She cranes her neck back to look at the second-floor landing.

“In our room. Yes.”

“Bastard.” She stalks past me and hurries up the stairs.

I follow.

When I reach the top, she whirls and shoves me with all her might.

I easily hold my ground and grab her wrists. “Bold, my darling vixen. A broken neck on the staircase would have been rather convenient.” I yank her to me, her surprised mouth open as I taste her again.

She scratches at my chest, her nails doing no damage as I grip her ass, my hands molding to the satin, and lift her. Her little moan is all the urging I need, and I stride toward our bedroom. She will be mine tonight, and I will use every dirty trick I know to make it happen.

The double doors to our room are already open as I carry her inside.

A meow seems to wake Cassandra from the haze of lust, and she wriggles in my hold. I put her down, and she runs over to the cat carrier.

“Ms. Kittles!” She opens it and clutches the gray tabby to her chest.

“She is unharmed as promised.” I strip off my suit coat, then unbutton my shirt, and step into my closet for a moment.

When I return, Cassandra is plopped on the rug and cuddling her pet. “I’m so sorry. Did those mean men hurt you? Did they mistreat my sweet one? Did you tell them you’re the greatest spider-slayer this world has ever known?”

The cat eats it up, meowing pitifully and butting Cassandra’s head.

I stride over and drop to my haunches.

The beautiful feline stiffens.

So does the cat.

“Hello, Ms. Kittles, we haven’t been properly introduced.” I hold out my hand, expecting the tabby to scratch and bite me.

Instead, she eyes my hand, then moves closer.

Cassandra’s eyes widen when Ms. Kittles licks my proffered fingers.

“She’s never done that before.” Cassandra shakes her head, then looks at me with something just short of admiration. “You’re the only man she’s ever liked.”

“Animal intuition.” I use my fingers—the ones I coated with tuna oil—to scratch Ms. Kittles’ head while I smile down at my vixen. “She knows you and I are meant to be.”

CASSANDRA

I pick up a purring Ms. Kittles and hold her in my lap, away from Luke. She likes him. She doesn't like anyone. Though, it could be because he's provided her this castle. What girl wouldn't be a little excited about that? It will be even better when it's just ours. I have no idea what I'll do with all this space. Ms. Kittles could have her own wing if she wants. I doubt it though. She loves her little princess bed that I see out of the corner of my eye. Now that I look around, I notice that all my things are here. Luke must have had them brought over. At least that's done. One less thing I'll have to do once I get rid of him.

"I think something fishy is going on around here," I say, still not believing she licked him. I was sure she was about to bite him and I was going to get a good laugh.

Luke smirks, not denying it. Probably because I'm crazy. How could he have gotten her to lick him? Damn it. She is falling under his weird touchy spell, too. We just need to make sure he doesn't touch us anymore. My mind keeps saying it, but my body doesn't always seem to listen. The way he just scoops me up and turns me around and kisses me and turns me on, it's ridiculous. I need to be stronger.

"I am having fish prepared for Ms. Kittles for dinner. The chef is making it now." Luke stands. "If that is to her liking?"

I feed her canned food. He is trying to one up me with my own cat.

"I feed her." Fine. I'm bitter.

Ms. Kittles curls into a ball, getting comfortable on my very expensive wedding dress. She doesn't look the least bit upset about anything. Why isn't she freaking out? I guess I'm doing it enough for the both of us.

"I'd planned to eat you, but it looks like that will have to wait."

I let out a small gasp.

He probably did have those plans, and I'd almost let him. When he gets that mouth on me, I seem to forget everything. Especially the fact that I'm supposed to kill him. Ms. Kittles had saved the day earlier, breaking me from the lust fog I'd fallen under. She no longer holds just the title of spider slayer, but cock blocker as well. I pet her little head in appreciation.

"There will be no more licking." I point first to Luke then to Ms. Kittles, who ignores me and licks my finger. She doesn't seem as happy with my finger as she did Luke's.

She gets up from my dress, trotting over to her bed and plopping down.

Luke reaches down. I let out a small scream as he lifts me to my feet. He helps me balance so I don't fall over in my heels. "Get ready for dinner. I had your things brought over and picked some things out myself as well."

"I'm not hungry." I look anywhere but at him, because I notice my eyes keep going to his handsome face. Ever since he mentioned he had plans to eat me, I keep thinking about that face between my thighs. If the way he kisses is indicative of the pleasure he can provide, then it's no wonder I can't stop thinking about it.

"Liar." He grabs the top of my dress and with one hard yank, he rips it right down the center. Holy crap he's strong. "As good as you looked in the damn thing, I'm the only one that takes you out of your wedding dress."

"My dress!" It's now in a pile at my feet.

"Did you want to save it?" he asks.

I don't know why, but I'm just shocked he ripped it. A little more turned on, too. Damn! "Pass it down to one of our daughters one day?" he adds.

"You want daughters?" My hand flies over my mouth. I can't believe I said that. I don't think I've ever heard a man say he wanted a daughter before. At least not from the men I'd grown up around. My father never let me forget how much better things would've been if I'd been a boy.

"Why wouldn't I want daughters?" He steps towards me, pulling me to him. My hand drops from covering my mouth to his chest. "I'll take a son, too. Whatever you'll give me." His lips come down onto mine. Again catching me off guard, he kisses me deeply. Stars burst in my mind as he runs one hand to the nape of my neck.

But then he pulls back from kissing me and takes a step away. My hand drops from his chest. I fight myself not to lift it and put it back. This is going to be so much harder than I thought. He is supposed to be mean and cold. He shouldn't be getting Ms. Kittles to purr. Me too for that matter. Every time he touches me, my body can't help but give in.

His eyes roam over me. "Put clothes on before you come downstairs."

For the first time there is actually a warning to his tone. I look down at my underthings and let out another small scream before bolting toward the bathroom and slamming the door behind me. I hear his laughter from the other side of the door.

"There aren't any weapons in there, my little vixen, but I'm sure there will be a steak knife at dinner you can steal."

I hear his steps, then the doors to the bedroom close. The man is quick, not just in speed but in thinking. If I'm really going to kill him, I'll have to be quicker. My eyes look up to the mirror. My lips are swollen, and my lipstick is gone. My hair that was perfectly styled is now a mess. I look sexy. My eyes trail down to the silk panties and bra I have on. I don't remember thinking that I looked this sexy when I'd put them on. I close my eyes, taking a breath, trying to get it together.

When I fling open the bathroom doors, Ms. Kittles is sitting in the middle of the giant bed, having made herself at home.

“You’re not helping!” I snip at her. She lets out a cute meow. “Sorry.” I go over to her, petting her until she rolls over and gives me her tummy to rub. “We better get ready.” I kiss the top of her head. Luke was right. I am a liar. I’m *starving*. I want to go to dinner and get out of this room before he comes back looking for me, and I give in to him. Best if I stay out of the bedroom as much as possible.

I head into the closet that I saw him disappear into earlier. My eyes almost pop out of my head. It’s bigger than my old bedroom. No, my old bedroom could fit in here three times over. All my things are already hanging in a neat row. Everything is put away as if it has always been here. It gives me a sense of comfort when I look it over. I didn’t think when I left my old house that I’d ever see my things again. Not that I want to go back there, I just hadn’t realized what a difference seeing them here would make. It makes it feel as though it’s more of a home.

No. I stiffen my upper lip. *This isn’t my home.* I didn’t have one of those. Home is somewhere you feel like you belong. At least I think that’s what it’s supposed to feel like. My fingers run along Luke’s suits until I reach my own clothes.

I bypass them and stop at all the new things hanging with tags. Some I’ve never seen before. Beautiful, nonetheless. Some of these items I had searched and saved as favorites. This man really doesn’t miss a thing. He’s going out of his way for me. I reach for the Dior dress that feels like heaven on my fingertips. I don’t even think it’s out yet.

I slide it over my head, and like my wedding dress, it fits me perfectly. I wonder if he handpicked it for me or sent one of his workers to get it. I don’t know why the thought of him selecting it for me brings a tingle to my body. My stomach growls, reminding me of the reason I’m actually getting dressed at all. I slip into a pair of red bottomed shoes and stop to look in the mirror. I look damned good in this getup. Let’s hope that looks can kill because if they can, it will save me a lot of trouble.

LUKE

She meets me in the hallway, and I stifle my need to pull her into my arms. Does she have any idea what she does to me? Turns me into a brute who can only think about pleasing her in every way she deserves.

“What’s for dinner?” She strides past, her chin up and the red-bottomed heels accentuating her long legs.

“I’m glad you asked.” I take her arm and walk with her toward the stairs.

She doesn’t shrug me off. Progress.

“I’ve hired a chef who’s prepared beef Wellington with risotto and seared scallops. I’d use my usual chef, but I wanted this to be especially delicious for you.”

She stops in the middle of the stairs. “That’s ...” She narrows her eyes. “That’s the menu from Hell’s Kitchen that I have pinned on my Pinterest board. I love that show.”

“I know.” I escort her the rest of the way.

Her heels click when we hit the marble foyer. “Who’s the chef?” The suspicion in her voice is edged with excitement.

“I suppose we’ll find out.” I give her a short tour as we walk to the dining room. “And this can be your office, should you want one.” I point to the book-lined walls of my small, but well-curated, library.

“Yes, please.” Then she shakes her head and adopts a haughty expression. “I mean, I’ll choose whichever room I want once

your body's in the ground.”

“Of course,” I agree affably.

She wrinkles her nose. “I’m serious.”

“Yes.”

“No.” She stops. “I mean I’m *serious*. I’m going to kill you.”

I want to remind her that she can’t even kill a spider. She uses Ms. Kittles for that bit of death. But I don’t, because she truly feels strongly about murdering me, taking what’s mine, and gaining her freedom. “All right, but could you wait until after we meet the celebrity chef?”

She clasps her hands in front of her, her eyes wide. “Is it really him?”

A string of curses in a decidedly British accent reverberate from the kitchen.

“Oh my God, it’s him!” She jumps up and down, a feat in the heels she’s wearing.

“Would you like to meet him?” I tamp down my jealousy. He’s married, and he’s been briefed on what’s expected of him.

“Are you kidding? Yes!”

I hold my hand out to her.

She takes it, her palm sliding perfectly against mine.

“Let’s go introduce ourselves.” I walk with her to the kitchen door and push it open. The entire room is a whirling dervish of activity with the chef at the head.

He turns and smiles, his hands open toward us. “Mr. and Mrs. Knight, welcome!”

To my utter surprise, Cassandra doesn’t disavow the name, she simply pulls me over to him and gushes about how he’s her favorite chef and who she thought should’ve won season three.

She shines, and I notice more than a few stolen glances from some of the assistant chefs. I’d like to murder them and throw them in the deepest mine I own. But I don’t. Because I’m the one whose hand she hasn’t let go of. I’m the one who’ll be

making her moan tonight. And I'm the man who will tame this little vixen at my side, and enjoy every second of it.



“Did you enjoy it?” I toss my napkin beside my plate.

She pats her stomach. “I’ve never eaten so much in my life.”

“No?”

“Mother never would’ve let me have this much food.” She shakes her head. “I think her goal was to pawn me off on some gullible rich guy, so she wanted me thin and pretty.”

“You’d be pretty no matter what your weight.” I mean the words. She’s beautiful, and I’ll take her however I can get her.

“Really?” The surprise in her tone somehow hurts me, the thought that she would devalue herself based on her looks doesn’t sit right.

“Does that make me the gullible rich guy?” My blood still boils when I think of how her mother tried to sell me her virginity right along with the antique fire irons.

“Hey, if the shoe fits.” It should ring as an insult, but instead she smiles playfully. “But somehow you don’t strike me as gullible. Foolish? Yes. I mean, you married someone who wants you dead.”

“You still plan to end me?”

“Definitely.” She nods.

Clayton stands in the hall, and I can almost hear his neck creaking with tension as the threat rolls off my vixen’s lips.

She groans as she stands. “But maybe it can wait until after I come down from this food high.”

“Upstairs?” I offer my hand.

She takes it. “Because I want to see Ms. Kittles, not because I want to be with you.”

“Naturally.” We walk through our home, and I can tell she likes the décor by the way her eyes seek out the art and glittering lights.

Stopping at the base of the stairs, she turns her head toward the formal sitting room, then gasps. “Is that ...” She pulls away from me and hurries into the room. “It is.” She stands and looks up at the artwork that takes up a good portion of the side wall.

“You’re a fan of Klimt?” I ask.

“I love him. I’ve stared at this painting so many times on the internet.”

I know. I’ve had access to her internet browsing for the good part of the last six months, ever since I first saw her at that dinner with her parents. I even know what porn she prefers, the way she likes her coffee, and the particular brand of face cream she favors.

“What do you love about it?” I can tell if something is beautiful, but I’ve never truly had an eye for art. However, I acquired Adele Bloch-Bauer I by Klimt at an auction, paying a hefty sum for the golden portrait. But I’d have paid double or more if it meant I got to see my vixen with wonder in her eyes.

“I love everything about it.” She speaks as if in a dream. “Every bit. The expression on her face, the necklace, the realism mixed with the fantasy of so much gold that it’s layered in different hues, as if they’re different weights.”

She has an eye. I store that fact away for later. For now, it’s time for bed.

“Come.” I take her hand again and lead her away from the painting.

“Can I look at it in the morning?” she asks.

“This house is as much yours as mine, and so is the painting. You can look as much as you like.”

“Thank you.” She seems to say the words despite herself because she quickly follows it with, “I mean, yeah, I can do

whatever I want because you'll be dead and all this will be mine."

I smile and lead her back to our bedroom as Clayton stalks through the house, making sure the chef and his entourage leave and no one else enters.

Once I have her inside our room, I close the doors and pin her against them. "Wife."

Her pupils widen, her body warm against me, and she kicks her chin up and says, "for now."

I smirk. "Now is all I need."

She gasps as I claim her mouth, and I intend to claim much, much more than that.

CASSANDRA

I'm in total control here, I tell myself. I'm *letting* him take my mouth in a deep, knee-weakening kiss. I could push him away if I wanted to, but I dig my fingers into his shirt. I'm totally the one who's driving this bus. I'm just making a detour. My new plan is to let him *think* he's in control. The more he thinks I'm willing to go along with this, the easier it will be to catch him off guard when he least expects it. This is my new attack strategy, I reason with myself. His attraction to me will lead to his death. I'll use every advantage I can get.

I moan into his mouth as he lifts me from my feet. My back hits a bed.

"I'm allowing this only because it will please me. I'm still going to kill you after." I try and make it sound like a command, but my voice comes out a little breathy and filled with need.

He's kissing down my neck. I can feel his smile against my skin. As he tries to fight the laughter, his body shakes with it. Damn it. I need him shaking with desire, not laughter. I'm the one who's going to be laughing. I'm like a female praying mantis. I'm going to let him pleasure me then make my kill. I'm not going to bite his head off, because that'd be gross, but I'll think of something else.

My mind blanks as he nips at my neck than kisses that spot. "As my wife commands."

One of his hands snakes up my thigh, the roughness of his fingers spiking my desire. He lifts a little to make room for his hand. I have to fight a cry to pull him back down onto me, needing the pressure between my thighs that his body was giving me. I could rub against him to try to get that friction that could temper the desire between my thighs. The throb of my clit is betraying me. *What's wrong with me taking a little pleasure for myself?* my mind whispers, crossing over to the dark side with my body. Double crap.

I spread my legs wider to make room for his fingers as he traces the edge of my panties too softly. "Why are you going so slow?" I snip out.

His body shakes again.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Never." He nips my neck again. Why does it feel so good when he kisses me there? My hips rise, begging for more.

"I'll make it better." He yanks on my panties, ruining them. I don't know what the man has against nice clothes, but he's lucky he can afford to buy me more or I'd say something about it. Instead of complaining, I wiggle under him as he slips down my body and pushes my dress up as he goes. I grip it, pulling it over my head and tossing it away. He smirks at how quickly I gave in.

"I like that dress." I do. I don't need him ruining it. It's not because I have an overwhelming need to be skin to skin with him. "If I'm naked you have to be naked."

Again, he does as I ask and pulls his shirt over his head. Holy hell. Muscles plus a few more muscles and smooth, tan skin. Why does he have to be so hot? Then again, it only makes this more enjoyable for me.

"Like what you see, wife?" he asks as his hands go to my hips.

"Nope. Not one bit."

He only smiles bigger.

"I mean, honestly, you should consider joining a gym to get in better shape," I say as my gaze travels down his perfect chest.

He's probably one of those people who can run without getting winded. Yeah, now I'm definitely going to kill him.

"Lose the bra," he tells me as his hands go to my hips.

I hurriedly do as he asks because yeah, I totally love that bra and don't want it ruined. It has nothing to do with wanting to be naked beneath his touch. Or the fact that I'm aching for the pleasure I know he's going to give me. I mean the pleasure I'm going to *take* from him, because I'm calling the shots.

When I look up, his eyes are focused on my breasts. His hand leaves my hip and comes up. He squeezes my breast as his thumb swipes over my nipple. He dips his head and takes my nipple into his mouth. I almost scream out in pleasure but I hold it in, not wanting to give him the satisfaction. My body arches toward him, telegraphing my thoughts. He releases my nipple and nibbles his way down to where the ache I have for him has grown almost unbearable.

"You taste as good as I imagined, my little vixen. Is your pussy as sweet as your skin?" His finger strums my clit for the first time, gaining him a moan from me. "You're soaked for me," he says as he continues to rub the ache between my legs away. My body pushes into his hand, wanting what he's giving more than anything. "Since my death is imminent, I'm going to enjoy what might be my last meal." He removes his hand and replaces it with his tongue. He groans as he tastes me for the first time, and it's the sexiest sound I've ever heard.

I don't even try to resist or pull away. He's the one that wanted to be my husband, and it's his duty to pleasure me.

It strikes me how kind and considerate I'm being, giving a dying man his last wish. I am a magnanimous killer, it seems.

Damn, his mouth on me feels good. Maybe I should keep him around a bit longer. Not because I feel anything toward him but for what he does to my body. I've almost made the decision when my orgasm pushes down on me. I cry out his name as the sweetest pleasure I've ever felt rolls through my body, causing my eyes to fall closed. I'm still for a moment as I savor the feeling.

So many emotions flow through me that I don't know what to do with them. I shake my head no as my eyes spring open. It's all so much, and I feel out of control. Luke comes over the top of me, looking down into my eyes.

"Cassandra?" He says my name gently, like someone trying not to spook a frightened animal.

I am not the one who should be scared. I don't know why my emotions are all over the place, but I lock my legs around him. I see the shock in his eyes when I do it. His pants are gone, his bare cock digging into me. He must have ditched them when I was in orgasmic bliss. I twist my hips as hard as I can, flipping us until I'm over him now. I don't know if I took him by surprise or he let me do it, but either way, I'm on top now.

I reach between us, guiding his cock to my entrance as I sit up.

"Cassandra." Luke grips my hips in warning.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" I ask. I drop down an inch. Holy shit. He's big. How is he even going to fit inside me? I'm glad I didn't get a chance to really see it. I might not be so bold.

"Not like this," he growls, his fingers digging into me, but it's too late. This time I move faster, sinking down onto him. I think he was right. I *am* only hurting myself, after all.

LUKE

When she winces, I roll us over, pinning her beneath me.

“My little vixen bit off more than she could chew.” I pull out despite my need to fill her to the brim.

Her eyes water.

“Breathe.” I kiss her again, slowly now, soothingly. Rubbing my cock against her, I stroke her clit until she loosens up again, her body working against mine, seeking the delicious friction. I pull back. “Better?”

She nods, her tears gone and desire filling her beautiful eyes. When she digs her little nails into my shoulder, I slide into her with agonizing control.

Her breath hitches, but she spreads wider, taking all of me as I struggle to breathe. Her tightness is a heaven all its own, but I have to wait. To make sure she’s comfortable. Hurting her isn’t something I’ll ever do.

“More.” She leans up and nips at my chin. “More. Give me what I want, and I’ll kill you after.”

I pull out and press back inside her, learning her body so I can worship it with mine. Taking her mouth, I surge deep, then start a slow rhythm. She arches against me, her body warm and pliant as I take what I want. Sinking into her is what I was made for, just as she was made to come on my cock, to take my seed, to be mine forever.

“Harder, my little vixen?”

“Yes.” The word floats on her moan.

I give it to her, pumping my hips harder as I slide my tongue down her throat and suck on her frantically pulsing jugular. Burying one hand in her chestnut hair, I pull so she opens to me even further, her breasts a lure no man could resist. Sliding my mouth lower, I capture one nipple and suck it until she’s scratching my scalp, her body undulating beneath me as my cock makes a home between her thighs.

Switching to the other breast, I suck and lick until she’s moaning, her body tightening as I love her the way she deserves. Each stroke is like a shot of lava in my veins, and I’m overwhelmed with love for this wild creature beneath me.

“You like it when I’m inside you, don’t you?” I kiss back up to her throat and bite her lightly. “Taming you with my cock.”

She shakes, her body trembling beneath me. “Yes,” she hisses.

I speed up, plunging again and again into her hot pussy as she bites my lip then takes my kiss. My tongue masters hers as I own her body, everything inside me focused on the way we fit together, the movements that make her legs shake, the way she clutches at me, her nails drawing blood.

Sitting back, I yank her onto me, her breasts bouncing as I fuck her. “Touch your pretty pussy for me.”

She trails one hand down her breast, past her stomach, then presses a finger to her clit.

“Show me how you touch yourself when you think about me. When you imagined me on top of you, fucking you senseless. I know you did, my little vixen.”

“Luke.” Her moan goes straight to my cock, thickening it even more. She does as she’s told, her little fingers stroking her clit faster and faster as I pump inside her.

My fingers are going to leave bruises, but I can’t stop. I’m too wrapped up in her, and I can’t pull my gaze away from her fingers teasing her clit.

When her hips slow to a roll, her thighs shaking, and she arches one final time with my name on her lips, I shove deep

inside her and come, releasing all my desire into her as her pussy tightens around me in waves. I slap her fingers away and stroke her myself, wringing every last bit of pleasure from her as I groan, her pussy taking every ounce I have to give, greedily draining me in its tight grasp.

Her body slowly unwinds, and her lower back hits the bed. I fall on top of her, supporting myself on my elbows as I drop kisses all over her face.

“My sexy vixen, how I love you.” I nibble her ear as she runs her hands down my back.

“That was ...” She trails off, sleepiness already making her eyelids flutter.

I suppose she *did* have a rather trying day. I roll to her side and pull her on top of me, then reach down and toss the sheet over us. My heart still pounds, not from exertion so much as from the fact the one I love is finally in my clutches. I’m never letting her go.

I kiss her hair again. “Get some sleep.”

She stiffens minutely. “This doesn’t change a thing. I’ll still kill you in the morning.”

“Of course.” I wrap one arm around her back and close my eyes. “But may I make a request?”

“Hmmp?”

“Wait until I’ve gotten another taste of your pussy. Every doomed man gets to choose his last meal, right?”

She shakes with low laughter, then takes in a deep breath and drifts off to sleep in my arms, where she belongs.



A low thump-thump-thump sound outside awakens me. I glance at the clock. We’ve overslept. I breathe her in, the smell of her hair, the gloriousness that is my wife.

She blinks, her eyes bleary as she wakes. “What’s that sound?”

“Transportation.” I roll on top of her, my hard cock begging for more of her slick heat. “We’re late.”

“Late for what?”

The bed shakes, and Ms. Kittles strides over and plops down beside us, her eyes on Cassandra.

“Good morning, spider destroyer.” My wife wriggles out from under me (yes, because I allow it) and strokes the tabby while engaging in admittedly cute baby talk.

I roll over and watch her, eyeing the smooth skin of her back and the cleft of her ass. Perhaps I can work into her from behind. I reach for her hip with that in mind when a swift double knock sounds at the door.

Sighing, I throw the sheet over her again and rise.

“Yes?”

“Vigo’s here. Ready to fly.” Clayton’s stern voice vibrates through the wood.

“Half an hour, and have breakfast waiting on the chopper.”

“Sure thing.” His footsteps recede.

“Did you just say ‘chopper’?” My vixen looks up at me as she strokes Ms. Kittles’ belly, then her eyes stray lower to my erection.

“Glad I didn’t see that last night. No way I would’ve let you put it inside me if I’d gotten a look at it first.” She licks her lips and has forgotten to pet Ms. Kittles. Apparently, that’s a great offense, because the cat tears down to the foot of the bed and jumps off.

I said half an hour, but with the way my bride stares at my cock, it’s going to take a while longer. “Come here.” I crook my finger at her.

She bristles for a moment, then seems to calculate. When she slides to the edge of the bed, I take her hand and guide her to her knees. She isn’t shy, her luscious body on display, her nipples begging for my teeth.

Without urging, she takes my cock in her palm, then leans forward and licks the tip. “Is this what you want?” She stares up at me with her big blue eyes. One might think she was an innocent—at least until she takes me to the back of her throat, gags a little, then tries again.

My hips jolt, and I tangle my fingers in her hair as pleasure unfurls all over me. “This is a lesson.” I grit the words out as she explores me with her tongue. “A punishment for hurting yourself last night.”

She glances up at me questioningly. I guide her back onto my shaft, forcing her head to do exactly what I want.

“You can have your way with me, Cassandra,” I tell her. “But not when it means hurting yourself.” I thrust into her mouth, her silky tongue drawing all of my heat southward. “Your pussy wasn’t ready for me. But from now on, I’ll take care to make sure it is.” She grips my ass, her nails digging in as she moans around my cock. “For now, this is your lesson. Hurt yourself, and there will be repercussions.” I groan as her tongue works the underside of my cock, her slippery noises a symphony of erotic filth.

I pull her hair, squeezing the strands as she moans, then shove deeper into her mouth as I come without warning. She sputters and swallows as best she can as I revel in the pleasure only she can give me. When I pull back, my cum drips along her lip and down her chin. She’s magnificent.

Pulling her to her feet, I wipe her chin with the sheet, kiss her, and slap her ass. “Now, we shower.”

I drag her to the bathroom and flip on all the jets in the walk-in shower. She’s barely caught her breath when I start lathering her hair with her favorite shampoo.

“Hang on.” She turns when I’m done rinsing her. “That was a punishment?” She reaches down and grips my cock, taunting it to try and thicken again.

“Yes.” I cup her breast and knead it, her skin water-slicked and perfect.

“Then why did I enjoy it?” She strokes me slowly, agonizingly, her wicked mouth teasing at my throat. “Why do I want to do it again?”

I wasn't going to eat her pussy or fuck her. She doesn't get to come until after lunch. That was part of the punishment I'd laid out for her in my mind. That seemed fair. But now that she's got me in her tight little grip, my resolve begins to waver.

“Why do I want to swallow your cum and lick you clean with my tongue?” She nibbles my lip. “Why do I want to feel you inside me, your hard cock filling me as I scream your name?”

I break. I'm only a man, after all. Turning her around, I force her to bend over, then shove inside her with a hard thrust.

She moans and flattens her hands on the tile wall as I fuck her, punishing her as I love her, pleasuring her as I wreck her.

Her breathing quickens, her body tightening, and when I reach around to stroke her clit, she explodes, her pussy convulsing as I spend again, my cock giving her every last bit I have as I furiously fuck her. My release is deep, animal, and total. My wife is mine, and she will know it every moment of every day.

When I stand her upright and turn her around, she looks up at me and quirks her lips.

“What?” I stroke the wet strands from her face as I try to catch my breath.

“I almost killed you that time.” She bites my chest.

I laugh, the sound welling up from deep inside me as I cage her against the wall. “Try again, my little vixen. Keep trying to kill me as much as you need.” I take her mouth, then lovingly wash her with the intention of dirtying her up again as soon as possible.

CASSANDRA

I wake up for the third morning in a row snuggled up next to Luke. His arm lies heavy over me, holding me to him. Ms. Kittles' tiny paw is nudging my face, trying to get my attention. I can feel Luke's peaceful breathing behind me. Although we're in a king bed, for some reason we're both on one side. I gently lift his arm, slowly moving myself out of his hold. I grab the nearest pillow and hold it for a few minutes, contemplating whether I should smother him. I haven't been trying very hard to kill him these past few days. He keeps making me forget. If I did off him now who would give me my morning orgasm? Sadly, I'm not as good at giving them to myself as he is.

"Checking the quality of the pillows, my little vixen?" he says without even opening his eyes. There's a smile on his face, telling me he knows exactly what I am up to.

"I was about to smother the life out of you, but I guess I'm not quick enough." I feign disappointment with a loud dramatic sigh that makes him smile bigger. My stupid heart does that funny thing inside my chest that it always does when he smiles.

It's hard to try to kill a man that keeps doing nice things for you. Especially when he brings you to Paris for vacation. Luke keeps calling this our honeymoon, but I refuse to acknowledge that. I replace the pillow and decide my killing efforts should be placed on hold until after we get back. Wouldn't want to be a foreigner with blood on her hands. Too many questions. I should enjoy this vacation. Plus, I'm slightly addicted to this

man's cock and the pleasure it brings me. Best to keep him around for a bit longer. Is there really a rush to kill him?

I climb out of the bed that's now shaking from Luke's laughter and head over to the hotel window. I draw the curtains to the side and stare directly at the Eiffel Tower. I have to admit that Luke pulled out all the stops when he booked the Shangri-La Hotel. He'd gotten us the penthouse with sweeping views of Paris. My parents always went on trips, but I never got to go. I was shocked when Luke's helicopter had taken us to a giant plane that whisked us away on our honeymoon. I mean *vacation*, I mentally correct myself. I can't have that word slip. Luke has already won too many battles at this point.

"You want to go to the Louvre today?" I almost jump as he comes up behind me, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me into him. He moves so stealthily for someone of his size. I'm realizing I'm not as graceful as I once thought. I breathe and Luke notices. I drop my head back for a moment, letting myself relax into him. God, he feels so good. He kisses the top of my head softly. It's sweet and too much for me to take. *He bought you*, I remind myself. *He's only being this nice so that you'll cooperate*. Those thoughts put me in a foul mood.

"If you're actually going to take me this time." I jerk from his hold, upset with myself for falling into an easy rhythm with him.

"You're the one that keeps derailing us," he gently reminds me. It *is* actually me that keeps getting sidetracked, but he played his part too. He shouldn't be so damn handsome and good with his cock. So, basically, it's all his fault.

"I'm not the one shoving my head between my legs." I put my hands on my hips.

"No, you shove *my* head between your legs." He laughs again.

I narrow my eyes on him. I clench my thighs together thinking about him between them. This is why we never get to go anywhere. As I've said before, it's his fault. If he wasn't so good at giving orgasms, then all of my problems would be solved.

“What’s yours is mine,” I say tartly before heading into the bathroom. I slam the door shut behind me, but why deprive myself of him washing me? He should wash me. He bought me so he could take care of me. He’d better make sure he continues to make me happy. His life depends on it.

“Luke!” I call out his name, opening the door to see why he’s not coming to take a shower with me, and I run right into him. I jump, almost falling back on my ass, but of course he saves the day and catches me easily.

“You called, my little vixen?” His fingertips reach out and trail down my cheek. I look up at his handsome face. His features are too perfect. They would be any woman’s downfall. The thought of other women around him has me feeling a certain way. I’m guessing it’s jealousy, but I’ll never admit to it. Any woman that comes near my man better be ready to meet her maker. He’s mine. Even if I plan on killing him, he’s still *my* husband.

“I need to be pleased and washed before you take me sightseeing.” I strip off my nightie, then toss it to the floor and head toward the shower.

“Is that so?” Luke follows closely behind me.

I turn, lifting one eyebrow at him.

He smirks, letting me know he’s going to give me what I want. He stops me before I get to the shower, pulling my naked body to him so that I’m pressed up against his chest.

“I’m going to give you what you’re asking for, wife,” he whispers in my ear before kissing my neck. He reaches down and squeezes my ass. “But later, I’m going to take you here,” he says as his fingers find my other entrance.

I let out a surprised gasp. There? All of him in there? I shudder with half fear, half pleasure at the thought.

“Deal?” he asks as his hand reaches around and begins to stroke my clit. My head falls back on his shoulder.

“I need an answer, my little vixen.” I get an excited thrill about him exploring me in all places, knowing that he’ll make it good for me.

“Deal.” I give in, because it’s what I want. Not because I have this need inside me that wants to please him, too. One that hopes to earn me another one of his smiles. Like a starved animal, I eat up the affection he’s giving me. I kind of lov— No. I push that thought away. I’m not going there. I don’t have to. I’m living in today and enjoying my honeymoon. I mean, vacation.

After our highly pleasurable shower, we spend hours roaming around the beautiful city of Paris. It’s breathtaking. More than I ever could’ve imagined. Seeing the Mona Lisa at the Louvre was one of the highlights of my life. It reminds me of how much of a sheltered life I’ve lived up until now. Although I’ll never say it out loud, I’m happy to have shared this with Luke. It’s a memory I’ll hold close once he’s dead.

When the sun goes down, I sit on our penthouse terrace looking through some of the things Luke purchased for me today. He spoiled me rotten while shopping on the infamous Champs-Elysees. There are so many shops. You would need to spend days on that glittering lane in order to visit them all. I had fun. More fun than I thought possible with Luke. It was more than I could have dreamed of. I would know, because I *have* dreamed of this. It’s pinned on my Pinterest boards. This very hotel is saved as one of my favorites.

The sparkle of the city isn’t half as alluring as my husband, I must admit. I got to see a different Luke than I’m used to. Not the same one that worked with my father or came to dinner at our house. He’s different with me than everyone else. I get a more laidback side of him. Today, he seemed more carefree, and I enjoyed his company and everything he knew about art. He kept catching me off guard with all the history he knew. He catches me off guard a lot. I can never seem to do the same to him. Am I so predictable? Is that a bad thing? I don’t know. Hell, I don’t know anything anymore. He isn’t only catching me off guard. He’s setting me off balance.

My stomach growls, reminding me of all the calories I burned on our shopping adventure.

“Hungry?” Luke’s voice breaks me from my thoughts.

“I could use a little snack,” I say, licking my lips. Thinking of the naughty words he said earlier.

Luke sits next to me and takes my hand as we watch the sparkling Eiffel Tower. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“That’s the plan.” At least, I think it is.

We eat a dinner of roast duck and roast vegetables whose main ingredient seems to be butter. I don’t mind one bit, and the fresh bread alongside it only adds to my enjoyment. I’ll be heavier on the trip back home. Home. I used to think my room at my parents’ house was my home. They kept me in there most of the time, locked away like a princess in a tower. But I wasn’t the innocent, sad sort who was waiting for her prince. I had plans to escape, to make my dreams come true, and to do it on my own. But—I stare at Luke as he wipes his mouth, his wedding ring shining on his finger—I suppose fate had other designs.

I groan as I eat the last bite of my chocolate mousse.

“Full?” He reaches across the table and takes my hand.

“If I eat another bite, I may be the one who dies tonight instead of you.”

“Is it tonight?” He seems interested, though I can hear the teasing in his voice. “What’s your plan?”

“You’ll like it better if the end comes as a surprise, don’t you think?” I smile, and I think he knows full well I have no scheme to take his life tonight. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t coming. Just not this evening.

“You’re right, my little vixen.” He brushes his lips over my knuckles. “Surprise me.” Standing, he pulls me up. “But I have a surprise for you first.”

LUKE

She walks with me through the main living area of the penthouse.

Rubbing her belly, she sighs. “I’m going to be ten pounds heavier when we get back home.” She wrinkles her nose. “I mean, to *my house*. Not, you know, home. With you.”

“Sure.” I keep walking until we come to the double doors that lead to the formal sitting room.

She squeezes my fingers, and her gaze is content as she glances over at me. What she just said—what’s that called? A Freudian slip? Her home is with me, and we will fill it with love and children. She’s right to think of it as home.

“What’s in there?” She peers at the white doors with the crystal handles.

“The surprise.” I let go of her hand and push the doors inward, then watch as her eyes open wide and she hurries in.

“Is this the Caravaggio?” She stares up at the painting, all the lights in the room specially turned and shining on it.

“Yes. It’s on loan from its museum in Rome.” I watch her closely. This painting isn’t one she’s pinned on her Pinterest like the Klimt, but it is one she visited online at two particular times in her past. One was when she tried to strangle her piano tutor. The other, when she went after her French teacher. This painting is a gamble, one I hope will pay off. I stay silent as she looks at it, moving closer until she’s so close to it that I

wonder if she can feel the disdain in Judith's eyes as she beheads the Syrian general Holofernes.

The painting is violent, gory, and tells of a woman's vengeance on a man who harmed her. Why would she visit it online after each of her violent bouts? I have my suspicions, and now I must wait for her to put words to them.

She stares for a long time as I stand behind her, my hands on her hips. When her shoulders shake, I pull her to me and simply hold her as she tries to stifle her tears. It doesn't work, and she lifts her hands to her cheeks and wipes them away. I want to turn her to me, to soothe her, but she needs this release, this way of channeling her emotions.

After a long while, her shoulders stop shaking and she takes a deep, cleansing breath.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I kiss her crown.

"No." She swallows hard. "But I guess I should."

"It might take away the hurt," I gently suggest.

"Mr. Girard." She wipes her cheeks again, but tilts her head up, looking at the painting. "He taught piano. He came to the house every Tuesday and Thursday. The sixth Thursday—I remember because he'd taught me to play Row Your Boat and I was so excited to show him I'd learned it—he came and watched me play. Then he ran his hand up my skirt."

I try to keep my breathing calm, to relax, to be strong for her even as the rage begins to burn inside me like the guts of a dormant, but violent volcano. I keep my silence as she wrestles with her next words.

"I fought him off and told my mom, but she said he was the best piano teacher in the state and that I was making excuses to get out of tutoring. So he came back on Tuesday." She tangles her fingers together, her anxiety telegraphing through her. "And I was ready for him."

"You did well," I coo.

She turns, her watery eyes a dagger to my heart. "I wanted to kill him, but I wasn't strong enough."

“You were young.”

She returns her gaze to the canvas. “The French tutor, he was sneakier. Mr. Barnes. He waited. I was his student for almost a year. One day, I missed several words on one of his sadistic pop quizzes. He told me the punishment was—” Her voice cracks, then she stiffens and kicks her chin up. “He said it would be for me to take my top off and let him touch my breasts. If I let him do that, then he wouldn’t tell my parents about my poor performance.”

The volcano is ready to erupt. I will have Clayton round these men up and bring them to me, but for now, I focus on Cassandra, on the cracks these men put in her heart, the way they tried to abuse her and ruin her trust.

“What did you do, my fierce vixen?” I stroke her hips.

She turns and looks at me, a devious pleasure in her eyes. “I stabbed him with my pencil. I was aiming for his junk, but nailed him in the thigh and nicked an artery. He didn’t bleed out, but he came close.”

“I wish he’d died by your hand.” I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her tight against me. What she doesn’t need to know is that both of these men will die, their bodies thrown into one of my mines, and their names quickly erased from history.

“Me too.” She unwinds in my arms, her tension falling away. “I hope they get what’s coming to them.”

They will. I kiss her ear, then nibble the lobe. “I’m sorry it happened to you.”

“I think the worst part is when my mother didn’t believe me.” Her voice is small now, sad. “She said I was making it up and trying to ruin their good name and trash my chances at marrying well.”

“How wrong she was.” I nuzzle into her soft hair. “Soon you’ll single-handedly own an enormous estate and unlimited wealth.”

She makes an *mmhmm* noise, all her initial joy at the prospect of my death gone. “I do love this painting.” She lets her head

rest against my chest. “Bloody and perfect.”

“Revenge is sweetest when served by a beautiful woman.” I wrap my hand around her throat.

She cranes back and meets my lips, her kiss full of emotion. I take what she offers, then demand more, turning her toward me and gripping her ass to lift her. Gripping my face with her warm hands, she kisses me feverishly, her tongue invading my mouth and setting off a need that threatens to overwhelm both of us.

Carrying her through the living area and into the bedroom, I don't bother closing the door. I sit her on the bed, yank her dress off and prowl on top of her. Her hands are on my neck, my shoulders, in my hair as I suck her throat, sampling her skin as I move lower and lick her nipples through the bra.

Sitting back, I grab the front of the lacy thing and rip it apart.

“You just bought that!” She frowns, then gasps as I bite down on her bare nipple.

“I'll get you five more.” I bite the mound of her breast. “And rip those off, too.” Sliding down her body, I yank her panties away, then bury my face between her thighs as she surges beneath me, her back bowing, her breath catching. I lick all the sweetness I find, then stand and strip out of my clothes.

She tweaks one of her nipples and reaches between her thighs.

“No.” I climb on top and press my cock inside her in one smooth glide.

She claws my chest as I start a hard rhythm that shakes the bed.

I want to fuck all those bad memories out of her, to show her she doesn't have to fear me, that I will never wrong her the way those dead-men-walking did.

“I love you, Cassandra.” I slow down and taste her mouth again.

She moans and rocks her hips against me.

I don't have to hear it back. She can show her affection in her promises to kill me like she's always done. That's enough for me. As long as I have her, I have everything.

Pulling away again, I grin when she lets out a frustrated whimper. I grab the lube from the bedside table. "Remember my promise?" I take her ankle and pull her over so she's lying on her stomach.

She tries to push up from the bed, but I'm already on top of her, pushing her down and biting her shoulder.

"Spread for me, my little vixen." I position my knees between hers, pour some lube onto my fingers, and press them to her virgin asshole.

"Luke!" she squeaks and tenses.

"Shh. Trust me. You can always trust me." I soothe her and massage her tight hole. "I will never hurt you. Do you trust me?" I hold my breath, and when she looks back and nods, I can't control the warmth that spreads through me.

"I'll go easy." I press one finger inside her and stroke her.

Her tension lessens and she moves with me, her hips rising from the bed.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" I lick my lips and tell my aching cock to wait its turn.

"Yes," she moans as I slide another finger in, stretching her and spreading the lube inside and out. I keep thrusting inside her, then grip her hip with my other hand and lift her onto her knees. Her round ass is a sight, and my fingers disappearing into her only makes my cock harder. I need to be inside her.

Pulling my fingers away, I position my tip against her and push slowly.

She grips the sheets, her knuckles going white.

"Are you okay?" I can barely speak when she's squeezing my head in her tight ass.

She wiggles her hips a little and pushes back against me.

“Fuck.” I put one hand on her lower back and ease further inside, my cock disappearing into her ass bit by bit until I have to stop. One, so I don’t come, and two, because I don’t want to hurt her.

“Feels good.” Her toes curl. “Weird, but good.”

I pull back, still inside her, then ease forward. Her moan has me doing it again and again, my cock in her ass as she rocks against me.

Reaching down, I strum her clit and press myself to her back.

Her moans grow louder as my cock goes deeper and my fingers work her. She grips the sheets again, her cheek to the mattress. Sliding my fingers lower, I push two inside her hot pussy, and she gasps my name. Dragging her own wetness back to her clit, I finger it until her body shakes.

When she comes, I can’t wait one second longer. My cock pulses inside her, my seed spilling into her ass as I grunt, deep and hard just like my orgasm. Her ass is a perfect vise, squeezing me until I’m dry, my cock empty but my heart full.

I relax on top of her, then ease out and roll to her side.

“Are you all right?” I kiss her cheek.

She lets her hips sink to the bed as she sighs. “I’ll be walking funny, but it was worth it.”

“You’re worth it all, my little vixen.” I kiss her, then pull her into my arms and whisper everything I love about her in her ear until she falls asleep.

CASSANDRA

“*W*hat’s the code to the vault?” I shout to Clayton, who I know is standing outside of Luke’s office. Someone is always close when Luke isn’t here. At first it annoyed me, that someone is always watching over me, but I’ve come to appreciate it more as the days go on. Everyone knows that with power and wealth come enemies.

“I don’t know it,” he sighs from outside the office.

“Oh.” I pull out my cell phone and hit call on the contact labeled ‘husband.’ I tried to change the name five times and it wouldn’t let me. I don’t know how Luke pulled that off, but he did. I’m disappointed, because I’d come up with some good replacement names and he was ruining all of my fun.

“Little vixen.” Luke answers before the phone can ring more than one time.

“I want the code to the vault.”

I wait for him to tell me no, but it doesn’t come. Instead he doesn’t say anything. “Luke?” A small trace of panic fills me at his silence. Is he not going to give it to me? Is he going to ignore my question? I shouldn’t be surprised; that’s what my parents always did. I should be used to it by now.

“Sorry, wife. I was stepping away.” I swear I can hear the smile in his voice. “Did you think I wouldn’t give you something that you’d asked for?”

“I—“ I don’t know what I thought. I’m still playing this game. He rattles off the code without hesitation this time.

“Took you long enough,” I huff out as though he’s wasting my precious time. I hear him chuckle on the other end, which brings a slight smile to my face. I love poking him.

“You don’t need it, though,” he adds. “You can put your thumb on it.”

I lift my hand, putting my thumb on the pad. The vault clicks open. I’m not even going to bother asking how the hell he got my thumbprint programmed into his vault. I’m impressed. That’s the thing about Luke; he’s nothing like I expected him to be. At each turn, he surprises me and shows me a little more of himself. He doesn’t hide how much he cares about me and the lengths he’ll go to make me happy. He’d said he loved me in Paris. I’m starting to think he really does.

“There aren’t any weapons in there, little vixen. There is a handgun in my nightstand, though.”

I arch an eyebrow at the phone. I’m starting to think Luke has no regard for his own safety.

“Oh.” I lick my lips, not sure what else to say. “When are you coming back?” I hate when he’s gone for too long.

“Miss me?”

I do, but he’ll never hear me utter those words. “I’m planning your death,” I remind him.

“I’ll be home soon so you can have your way with me.” He laughs. “I love you,” he says before the call ends.

I drop the phone from my ear. I keep wanting to say those words back. I’m telling myself it’s a habit to want to say it back to someone. Then it dawns on me that I wouldn’t have such a habit. He was the first person to ever say those words to me. My parents never even said them when I was a little girl. They’d always treated me as though I wasn’t wanted. They had to keep up appearances and make sure they did the basics to look like they were decent parents, but behind closed doors they were monsters. I feel wanted so much more now that I can see what love is, what else is really out in the world.

I pull the door open to reveal that the only thing inside is a folder. I grab it, flipping it open to see our marriage license

inside. My eyes sting with tears looking over it. I put it back, closing the vault door. Everything inside me swirls. I hate that he's gone. My emotions are all over the place after looking at that piece of paper. It's a reminder of how I got here. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing at the moment.

I stomp from his office, flinging open the door. Clayton jumps back, the door almost hitting him. I have to bite my tongue from saying I'm sorry. He is, after all, one of the men that helped Luke in purchasing me. He had a hand in all this. I have a feeling that I'll have to kill him too, if I kill Luke. Unless Luke has made the man swear he'd protect me even in his death. I have a feeling that is the case. Clayton and all of Luke's other men are the most loyal bunch of people I've ever seen. They'll do anything for him without question.

"You okay, Mrs. Knight?" Clayton asks.

I nod and head up the stairs. Ms. Kittles is hot on my trail as I go straight for our bedroom. I barely make it through the bedroom doors and my phone is ringing. 'Husband' scrolls across the screen. I don't want to answer it but dammit, I miss him. It doesn't help that he's making me feel all this weird crap inside. On one hand, he's the man that took me and basically forced me into marriage, and on the other, he's the one that's allowed me to be myself. He's opened up the world to me. He's gone to great lengths to put everything that I could want at my fingertips. It's more freedom than I've ever known, and it's boundless because Luke has made it that way for me. My inner turmoil should be expected. How could I want to kill and love the same man?

"What?" I snip.

"Are you crying?"

"Never." I lie as if he hadn't held me while I shed some of my past in his arms. He'd taken something horrible from deep inside of me and released it. I didn't realize I was still holding on to it, allowing it to eat away at me, but it was. Luke had somehow known that I needed to be free of those demons, and he took steps to make sure that I had a chance to do it. That

painting was the key, and I was the lock. And he *knew*. He just knew.

“Baby.” His voice is so soft and sweet that it takes my breath away for a moment. “I’m coming to you.”

“I’m fine.” I sniff. “Maybe it’s hormones. I could be pregnant.” The idea should scare the crap out of me but it doesn’t. I never thought I’d want children. I wouldn’t know how to raise a baby. I don’t know the first thing about them, but the idea of having one with Luke sounds tempting. Too tempting. I’m not ready to share him. Wait, I’ll be killing him so there will be no sharing. That will make me a single parent though. I’ll have to think this killing thing over more carefully.

“Liar.”

“Whatever.” I huff as I drop down onto the bed. I know I’m not pregnant. I’ve been getting the shot since I turned eighteen. I guess Luke knows everything. I’m sure that’s something he knows as well.

“You don’t want babies with me?” I accuse. I don’t even know where that came from. I don’t want a baby right now. Again, I am going from never wanting something to now toying with the idea of it. He really does have me in a mess.

“One day, when you’re ready, my vixen.”

“You always say the right thing.” I stare up at the ceiling. I feel better now that I can hear his voice again.

“I’m sorry I didn’t wear you out enough before I left.”

I smile. He tried. He did exhaust me enough for me to take a nap, but I don’t sleep well without him now. He’s ruining me. The longer I let him live, the more attached to him I get. This is becoming a problem. Ms. Kittles is no help. She’s smitten with the man too.

“Vixen, open the nightstand.”

I swallow. I don’t actually like guns. “Luke. We should talk about your safety. You are really too careless.” I sit up “Only *I* get to kill you. You know this, right?” I ask as I peak inside the drawer. There’s a small handgun as Luke said there would be,

but the thing that catches my eye are the college brochures that sit next to it. I remain quiet as I pick them up and look them over. I can hear Luke's breathing through the phone, but I have no words. These are for me. Art programs, real school. There's nothing I can think to say to describe the way I'm feeling. Luke is paving the way for me to have a future that I'd thought was lost.

"Luke." My voice cracks. I almost say the words that I know he's dying to hear. But I don't, because in this moment, I don't want him to die. I want him to live and continue making me feel all the things he does. "Come home."

"Already here," he breathes into the phone. I can hear his steps coming down the hallway. He's on a mission to get to me. He always was.

LUKE

I take her in my embrace, holding her as she wraps her arms around my waist and snuggles against my chest. Her tears soak through my shirt, and I stroke her hair as I sit on the bed and pull her to my lap.

She hiccups as I rock her gently. My vixen is a woman, but her parents tried to hobble her, to stunt her with their vicious notions of keeping her locked away until they could sell her. She's working through it, but it doesn't come without its troubles. I only wish I could take away these growing pains, because she's had enough hardness in her life, enough coldness and loneliness.

"College?" she whispers.

"Yes." I kiss her hair. "Plenty of students start when they're a little older, not right out of high school. You'll fit right in." I know she was born to stand out, but I can feel her desire to be normal warring with that spark inside her that sets her apart. She can have both. And I'll be right there with her, welcoming her home every day and keeping a close eye on any college frat punk who tries to talk to her. "I thought about moving you closer to Boston so you could attend one of the Ivy Leagues, but then I thought you might like—"

"Don't." She pulls back, her eyes glistening. "Don't send me away."

My heart seems to burn for her when she clutches me close, worry coating her words. "Never." I wipe the wetness from her cheeks as more tears fall. "I wouldn't let you go without me."

She sighs. “Good.” She rests against my chest again, then mumbles half-heartedly, “I couldn’t kill you if we were apart.”

“Of course.” I stroke her back as her tears subside. “So I chose the college in town. It’s not Ivy, but not too shabby either. Their art program is ranked at number three in the nation. I expect we’ll spend your summers abroad or in New York, loading you up with all the art knowledge you can handle.” I pause. “But if you’d rather not—”

“No.” She straightens and looks at me with a warmth that lights her up from the inside. “I want this. With you.” Her lip trembles a little, but she gets it under control. “I never thought I’d get out of my parents’ house, much less go to college. I always wanted it.” Her eyes cloud for a moment. “It’s how they tricked me into going with them to the chapel where we got married. I thought I was going to college.”

“I’m sorry.” I press my forehead to hers. “I’m sorry they lied to you, and it hurts me more than I can say that you regret marrying me, but—”

“I don’t.”

I still.

She cups my face in her palms. “I admit I was angry at first, and I’m still mad—but not at you. At my parents.” She takes a deep breath. “You.”

“Me?” I broach.

“You saw me. Me, broken pieces and all. And you wanted me anyway.” Her eyes water again. “I thought I was sold, but really I was freed. You took me out of my cage and gave me what I thought I’d never have. Choices. A chance. And—” She nibbles her lip. “Love.”

“I love you so much.” I can’t even describe it. I’ve never felt it, not until I saw her at her parents’ house, her eyes downcast with dark circles beneath, but a livewire mind underneath and a devious smile that could charm the devil.

She gives a quick nod, as if coming to a decision. “Luke Knight?”

“Yes.” My blood hums her name.

“I love you.”

I kiss her, claiming her mouth the same way she claimed my heart. No warning, no mercy.

She melts for me, her arms wrapping around my neck as I hold her close, taking every breath. When she makes a soft whimper, I slide my hand up her thigh and tease the edge of her panties. She spreads her legs for me, and I need no more invitation, my fingers pushing aside her lacy panties and sliding up her wet slit.

My cock is already hard, but I want to reward her, to show my love through my restraint. I stroke her clit slowly, building her fire one stick at a time as I continue making love to her mouth. When I press my finger inside her, she throws her head back, and I kiss her throat, sucking and leaving my mark as I pulse inside her, feeling her wet warmth, the heaven that I hunger for at all times.

“Luke,” she pants as I add a finger, stretching her, then drag them back to her clit.

I stroke her the way I know she likes, small circles again and again over that little ball of nerves. She’s a kitten in my arms, and I have complete control, but I only use it to please her, to give her what she wants but in my own time, my own way.

She gasps when I press harder, my fingers strumming her as her hips work me, her thigh pressing against my cock with each undulation.

I grit my teeth, the need to fuck her riding me hard. But I want to make her come first. So I stroke her and lick down her throat. Her dress and bra do nothing to hide her hard nipples from me, so I nibble one with my teeth.

She arches her back, her hands in my hair, her hips moving wildly. When I bite harder, she comes, her body tensing as I keep giving her what she needs, stroking her sweet pussy as she falls apart, each wave of pleasure coming out of her on a moan. Fuck, I love that sound. I keep it going for as long as I

can. Until she's spent, until she's panting against me, until she tries to close her knees.

"Not a chance, my little vixen." I set her on the bed and quickly free my cock.

She shucks her wet panties and tosses them across the room. I grip her hips and roll her to her stomach.

When I thrust inside her, my body goes taut. I'm home. Gripping her shoulder, I pull her back onto my cock, riding her rough as she moans and lifts herself away from the bed so she's on all fours.

I pull her up and wrap one arm around her waist as she turns her head and kisses me. Fucking her like this is almost too much to bear. My love. My heart. My sexy vixen giving all of herself to me like I've wanted from the day we met.

My release is sudden, every ounce of emotion swirling through me in a torrent as I grit my teeth and spend inside her, my cock kicking as she reaches down and rubs her pussy, bringing herself to orgasm as I kiss her throat reverently. She squeezes me inside her, her body shaking as she comes again, her moans lighting up my mind like electricity on a dark night.

When she breathes out a long sigh, I lay her down and fall beside her. Wiping some sweaty strands from her face, I tell her, "I love you." Because it's true. Because I'll never stop saying it. Because I want her to know each and every day that I treasure her above everything else.

She smiles. "I love you, too. I suppose I can wait till tomorrow to kill you."

"Thank you." I kiss her gently, sweetly.

A knock at my door has me growling against her mouth.

"Yes?" I call.

"We have some unexpected guests." Clayton sounds just as irritated as I feel. That can't be good.

I sit up. "Trouble?"

"Definitely."

“What is it?” The fear in Cassandra’s voice has me kissing her once more, trying to soothe it away. But then I stand and fix my clothes before opening the nightstand and taking the gun.

“Hang on to this. The safety is here.” I show her. “Keep it on unless you’re in danger. Then flick it off and shoot the hell out of anyone who’s threatening you. Understand?”

“Wait.” She shakes her head as she sits up. “Don’t go.”

“I’ll be fine.” I kiss her forehead and press the gun into her palm. “Take this. Remember the safety. I’ll be back.” I hurry away from her, and I don’t turn around, because if I do, I’ll want to stay.

Closing the bedroom doors behind me, I walk with Clayton down the long hall.

“I didn’t want to say in front of your wife, but her parents are here.”

My hands fist, but then I shake them loose. “They want her back.” It’s not a question. I knew the Carlises would want more money, and demanding their daughter back is the way they’d try to shake me down. “They can’t have her.”

“They brought some heavies with them..” Clayton hands me a pistol and pats the one against his chest. “Doesn’t mean there won’t be trouble.”

I nod and tuck the gun in the waistband of my pants as we hurry down the stairs.

If Cassandra’s parents think for one second I’ll let them have their daughter back so they can hurt her even more, they are going to be sorely disappointed. And if they push me? They’ll be dead. I shoot Clayton a glance, and I already know he’s on the same page given the wolfish look on his face.

I return his grin. “Let’s greet our guests.”

CASSANDRA

I keep my ear to the door until I can no longer hear Luke's and Clayton's footsteps. I couldn't make out anything Clayton told Luke. The wood door was too thick. I could only hear the mumble of their voices.

I head back toward my closet to find something suitable to wear. I need to be smart about my selection. I will, after all, be providing protection for my husband, because there is no way I'm allowing anyone else to harm him. *I'm* the only one who gets that privilege. I decide on yoga pants and a shirt, something easy to move in if I need to go "super ninja" on anyone. I slip the clothes on and head back toward the bed to get the gun.

Ms. Kittles lets out a loud meow. "You're right. I need shoes." I turn back toward the closet and pull on a pair of socks and sneakers. "You going to be quiet if you come with?" I ask Ms. Kittles, who lets out another meow, this one not as loud as the last.

"I'm not going to hurt myself," I rebuff as I look down at the gun in my hand. The weight is foreign to me. I've been around guns, but never like this. I was quick to grab a knife or even a random object to throw, hit, or occasionally stab someone with. Guns were never my thing. When I think of killing, it seems like it would be more personal if I use something else besides a gun. I want the person on the receiving end to feel my revenge. A gun doesn't fit that description for me. Anyone can use a gun to kill someone, but could they cut an artery using a pencil? The gun I hold now is cold and heavy, but I

know it's the best weapon of choice for me at this point if I want to protect my husband.

"We can do this," I tell myself and Ms. Kittles, but the worry remains. The finality of a gun is where I think I get caught up. That's what scares me. It's quick and easy, but also final. The two other men I've attacked were by my own hand. I'd felt somewhat in control. I could pull back at any moment. With a gun, death was likely imminent.

Even so, I grip the metal. "No one is taking him from us." Slowly, I pull the door open and peek my head out.

"Gray." I purse my lips at the man. Of course, my husband left a guard on my door. I should have seen that coming.

He gives me a shrug that says *I'm only doing my job*.

"Keep quiet," I whisper yell at him. "Don't try to stop me, or I'll shoot your ass." Ms. Kittles turns toward him and hisses. I might talk a big game, but she enforces it. Gray learned that the hard way once when he tried to pick her up.

"Mrs. Knight, please go back to your room. Mr. Knight has everything handled," Gray whispers while motioning me with his hands.

I put my hand out, signaling for him to keep quiet, and continue to creep down the hall. He goes to say something else but I point to the gun I'm holding in my other hand. I know he's not allowed to touch me, so he can't really stop me. Luke has specific rules for the guards. They're to protect me but not lay one finger on me. Only Luke's allowed to touch me.

I hear voices as I descend the stairs. They get a little louder as I reach the living room. I remain out of sight, trying to hear. It only takes me a few seconds to realize that the voices are those of my parents. Fear shoots through me at what their presence here means. My whole body goes still.

"We want our daughter to come back home," I can hear my mother's whiney voice proclaim. She sounds like someone when they hold their nose and try and talk, but high-pitched too. God, it's been nice not having to hear that voice. I didn't realize how much I loathed it until now. It makes my skin

crawl, but there's more, too. Not just the revulsion, but something far worse. Hope. Hope that she misses me, that she wants to see me because she loves me. I hold my breath as I creep closer.

"Is that so?" Luke responds, ice in his tone.

My heart starts to pound. I won't allow myself to believe he'd give me back. Over his dead body, which won't be happening because I love that man and only *I* can kill him. Still, some weird emotions are bubbling up inside me. My hand tightens around the gun.

"Someone has made a better offer. I'm sure you've already grown tired of her, no?" my father responds. I swallow. That stings. I hate that it does, but it still hurts.

My hopes are dashed just as quickly as they rose. They don't want to see me. They want to use me.

"I was sure you would've called us by now. She's nuts. That girl is no good to a man like you," my mother huffs, sounding annoyed that she's had to come here to retrieve me. "But it doesn't matter. We're not leaving here without her." I hear multiple clicks letting me know that guns have been drawn. My heart stills for a minute as I realize Luke really is in danger.

"If you ever speak about my wife the way you just did, I will have your tongue cut out." Luke's thunderous voice makes me jump. "You will not disrespect her in her home. You've done enough of that. Did you think you could come here and take her from me? That she'd want to leave me?"

My parents don't say a word. The room is completely silent until Luke speaks again. "She chooses what she wants, not me and definitely not you." His words warm my heart. Because it's true, Luke loves me, and he encourages me to choose what I want.

I choose to stay here and to protect my husband.

I flick the safety off and round the corner with my gun drawn.

LUKE

“*Y*ou can’t have me back.” Cassandra enters the sitting room, gun in hand, her eyes full of her particular brand of fury. A vengeful beauty.

“Sweetheart.” Her mother adopts what I suppose she thinks is a warm expression. “We are so sorry about all this. We made a mistake.” Selene stalks over to her, paying no mind to the gun in Cassandra’s hand.

I ease my hand into my pocket where my gun waits. The two hired killers the Carlises brought with them stand uneasily near the wide windows, their guns drawn. Usually, they wouldn’t have made it through the gate, but a quick chat with Clayton convinced me that bloodshed might be beneficial in this instance. Let them come. Let them see what awaits them if they ever try to destroy their daughter’s happiness.

“A mistake?” Cassandra lowers the gun to her side as her mother stops in front of her.

“Yes.” Selene reaches out and strokes Cassandra’s hair.

My vixen flinches, and I force myself to stand my ground instead of slapping the bitch’s hand away. Even though I’m protective, I know this is something my bride must do on her own. It’s the only way she can heal, can truly put her past away and live in the present with me.

“Selling me to Luke Knight was a mistake?”

“We didn’t *sell* you.” Her mother harrumphs. “We thought he’d be a good match for you. But now that I see you, I can

tell you need to come home. We love you, baby. We'll take care of you, protect you from this asshole that's keeping you prisoner."

"It makes sense." Cassandra nods.

My heart seems to go cold at her words, and I hold my breath.

"Of course it does!" Selene crows.

"No." Cassandra meets her gaze. "It makes sense that you believed my tutors over me. That you sold me. That you've come here to shake down my husband for more money or sell me to some other man. All of it makes sense now."

Selene's face falls as I let out my breath.

"You never loved me." Cassandra's eyes water, but she holds her head high. "I kept thinking you might, you know? Maybe if I dressed how you wanted and stayed in my room and did what you said. Maybe then you'd love me. But you never did. I was nothing more than a way for you to live your dreams, and you'd happily sell all mine just to make it happen for you."

The ache in her voice claws at my soul, but she has to say these things, has to experience the pain so she can grow past it.

"Of course we love you! You're being dramatic. We've always loved—"

"No. You used me. You kept me isolated. I had no friends. I had tutors and lessons. A princess in a tower. The only one who's ever truly loved me—" Her gaze snaps to mine, and I feel as though my heart might burst. "Is the man I'm going to kill when I get around to it." She shoots me a teary smile that breaks down every remaining wall between us.

"Darling." Her father takes a step toward her.

She raises her gun. "No more pet names. No more pretending. You two are no longer my parents. I am a Knight, and I will forever be a Knight. If I ever see you again, you'll be on the receiving end of a bullet."

Her mother winces and shrinks back.

Her father sighs, then motions for the hired guns to approach. “You’re coming with us whether you like it or not.”

“Wrong.” She points the gun at his face. “I only go where I want. I only *do* what I want. No one forces me. Not you and not them. And right now I want to pull this trigger.” She steps forward, her sadness breaking into a smile that makes my blood run deliciously cold. “I’m nuts, remember? You’ve been telling Luke that I’m crazy and that’s why he should cast me aside. And you know I have a penchant for violence.” She steps forward again, and her parents huddle against each other. “I’m that crazy violent girl, the one you had to keep locked away. And here you are, pissing me off. You know what I’m capable of.”

“Grab her!” Selene motions toward the armed men. “We’re leaving.”

They move toward her. The wrong decision.

I simply raise my chin.

The windows shatter as a gun roars, taking down first one hired gun, then the other. They fall, blood pooling from the headshots Clayton delivered from the roof of the east wing.

Selene screams. Cassandra smiles.

I pull my own gun and point it at the Carlises. “Come here, my little vixen.” I hold my free hand to her, and she runs to me and takes it. “Put the safety back on,” I whisper in her ear. “I’ve got this.” Her safety is the most important thing, and though I’m proud of her, I don’t want her to have any accidents.

“Good.” She gives me a relieved finger squeeze and thumbs the safety back into place.

“Selene, Marty, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” I motion them toward the foyer with the pistol.

“Not without my daughter.” Selene’s gaze is still on the bodies, her tone shaky.

“She’s not your daughter anymore. She’s free, and she’s chosen me. Take a good look at these men.” I point to the gore

and hope none of it splattered the Klimt I bought for my vixen. “Clayton is still on the roof, his crosshairs on your face, Selene. All I have to do is shrug, and your head will be splattered all over Marty. Hell—” I grin. “I could sneeze on accident, and then, *boom*, you’re done.”

Selene lifts her gaze to the shattered window. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.” I squeeze Cassandra’s hand. “And I’m rather inclined to do it anyway, given how you’ve treated my wife. Allowed her to be preyed upon, forced her to stay locked away, tried to clip her wings.” My anger grows with each sin I recite.

“Come on.” Marty’s wide, buggy eyes keep flicking between my gun and the east wing. “We need to leave.”

“Don’t come back.” Cassandra steps forward. “Ever. If you do, I’ll kill you.”

Selene’s face finally crumples, and she clasps her hands together. “Sweetheart—”

“Last chance.” She lets go of my hand and strides to the writing desk in the corner. Resting the gun on the table, she instead picks up a sharp pencil and turns toward Selene. “Test me, Selene. Maybe this time I destroy the artery and watch you bleed out.”

“Cassandra, no!” Selene backs away and almost trips over Marty.

“Go. Never come back.” My vixen brandishes her pencil and stalks them into the foyer, where they take to their heels and run to the front door. “I’ll kill you, I swear! You know I’m not bluffing,” she bellows and haunts their steps, me at her back as they jump into their car and their tires screech down my drive.

She stands with her head high and back straight. Cassandra vanquished her demons, and she did it with total control, total confidence. I marvel at the woman before me, the violent, turbulent, magnificent bride that is everything I ever wanted and more.

She turns to me and twirls the pencil between her knuckles, a mischievous smile on her plump lips. “I suppose the pen is

mightier than the sword after all.”

“When it’s wielded by the right person, yes.” I tip her chin up and kiss her hard, staking my claim. I want to tell her how proud I am, but I let my body say it instead as I lift her, carry her back into our house, and kick the door shut behind us.

EPILOGUE

CASSANDRA

Years later

“Oh my God. I think I love you,” I say as I enter the kitchen. My eyes take in all of the food that’s spread out on the kitchen island. My gaze flicks up to Chef Bottura, who has gone ghost white.

“Don’t kill him,” I quickly add and reach out to put my hand on my husband’s chest. “I’m teasing.” I think Luke is teasing, too, about killing Chef Bottura, but you can never be too sure. Luke slowly lowers his gun.

“You’d get blood all over my food.” I smack his chest and head toward the kitchen island. I don’t know where to start; every dish looks better than the last.

Luke had Chef Bottura flown in from Italy after I’d said I was craving one of his dishes. We’d spent our ‘real honeymoon’ as I call it, roaming France and Italy. This is where I’d first tasted the masterpieces that Massimo Bottura creates with food. He’s an artist in my eyes. I’m not even the tiniest bit surprised that my husband flew him here to cook for me. Luke does whatever it takes to make me happy. I may not have known what he was doing when he came into my life, but I quickly realized that he only had my best interest at heart.

“Don’t pay him any attention, Massimo. Please tell me what all of this is,” I say as I snag a bite of his tagliatelle. I moan when the taste hits my tongue. I hear Luke growl but I squint my eyes at him, letting him know that I’ll kill him if he ruins this for me.

“I’ve made you all of your favorites, Mrs. Knight.” I lick my lips and thank God I wore my stretchy pants today. “I’ve stayed away from soft cheeses, so you may not see some of the ingredients that you’re used to.” I side-eye Luke because he’s the reason that I’m not getting the full effect of Chef Bottura. “I did make the lemon tart that you love. *Mangia.*”

That brings a smile to my face. I clap excitedly, ready to dig in. A sharp pain runs up my back, making me freeze at the same time a gasp leaves my lips.

“Vixen.” Luke is all over me instantly. “What was that?”

I glance up at him as I quickly reach over and grab a piece of bread. I dip it in the ragu that is to die for. I want to stay at this table forever.

“A hiccup,” I say before I shove the bread into my mouth.

He narrows his eyes on me.

“She’s hungry,” I say with my mouth full and point to my giant baby belly. I’m due to pop any day now. Luke’s eyes grow soft as he puts his hand on my belly and starts to rub. I thought he was attentive before I got pregnant, but that was child’s play compared to how he is now.

“Are you sure?” He leans down and brushes his mouth against mine. I nod a yes, because I’m a liar. In all fairness, I’m really not sure what’s going on. I can only focus on all the delicious food that’s waiting for me to eat. I think I might have had a contraction, but I’m not ready. I can’t leave all this food.

“You’re not supposed to eat once labor starts,” he reminds me.

I know. That’s the main reason why I’m not telling him. I’ve got an island of food to eat! I can’t be in labor right now. Luke has read the pregnancy book cover to cover, multiple times. He even made us take a class on it. I think I napped through part of it. This baby is making me tired.

“Aren’t we celebrating?” I change the subject before Luke can try and call in the doctor. He’s so over-the-top that he hired one to be on call for the next few weeks. He has a backup plan for everything.

“We are. My wife is a college graduate.” He smiles, pride in his eyes. And he’s right, I am. College was exciting and new. I felt like I got to spread my wings. I also learned how much I missed my husband when I wasn’t with him. How I enjoyed art so much more when he was next to me to talk about. I grew, but I also realized that I could pursue my art dreams while also having a family. Just the thought of a little one with my eyes and Luke’s smile is enough to send my heart pitter-pattering.

“Right, I have a diploma, and I’m not afraid to use it.” I lean against him for a moment, then go back to the feast before me. “That means I’m the smart one around here. I’d know if I was in labor.” I totally think I am.

He smirks.

“Eat.” He prods me toward my food.

“Don’t mind if I do.” I eat one of the fresh-made tortellinis in broth. I wonder if Luke will let Massimo live here permanently. Probably not. I sigh internally. I never should have said the L word. That’s going to bite me in the ass. I meant it about the man’s food, not the man, but I probably screwed myself all the same.

Ms. Kittles struts past, her tail tickling my swollen ankles. A demure meow earns her a tiny bit of chicken, though it hurts me to share even that little bite. She chews it appreciatively and waits for more. I lean down to feed her one more piece, but my breath hitches again, and I squeeze my eyes shut in a moment of discomfort.

“Massimo, give me the tart!” I may have yelled that part at him as I sit back up.

Before I know what’s happening, Luke is lifting me and carrying me away from heaven.

I sadly wave goodbye to all of the goodies. I should’ve known he was going to bust me on my lie. “I would kill to have one bite of that tart.” I look up at Luke, who smirks at me. He’d laugh if he wasn’t worried about this whole labor thing.

“What am I going to do with you, little vixen?” he says as he places a kiss on my mouth.

“Let me go back and eat the tart?” I suggest.

“Later,” he tells me.

I huff as he carries me out. Of course there’s a car ready to go. I bet he had it on standby.

“Why later? I can eat it on the ride there,” I say sweetly even as the car pulls away. “Have Clayton bring it or Gray.”

“How are you feeling?” He ignores my suggestion.

“Just text them.” I pat his pockets for his phone. I’ll do it myself. He grabs my hand, stopping me.

“How are you feeling?” he asks again.

“I’m fine. I was just—” I stop talking as another contraction hits me, this one harder than the last. The pain is deep and unrelenting, and my desire for the food sparks into maniacal anger. “You did this to me!” I point at him. The car jerks, picking up speed. “I’m going to kill you.” I grab his shirt as the pain takes over my body. “I knew I was saving your death for something. This is it.”

“Breathe,” he says in my ear, pulling me close to him. His voice calms me even though I consider wrapping my hands around his throat and squeezing. I do as he tells me, because usually his way is the easy way. The contraction fades again as I rest my head on his shoulder. His hand rubs my back.

“Did you text them about my lemon tart?” I don’t see his cell phone anywhere. What has he been doing this whole time?

“I’ll get your tart, vixen,” he assures me. My eyes meet his. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I know.” I lean in, kissing him. I could do anything with Luke by my side. He not only gave me strength but freedom too. He makes me feel alive and loved. This man is my everything. He knows what I need before I even do.

“I bet you’re glad you didn’t off me all those years ago. Think of all you’d have missed out on.” He tries to lighten the mood

before he kisses my lips. I love this man more than I ever thought possible. He is my other half, my love, my protector, and my life.

“The night is still young.” I smile against his mouth. “Let’s go have our baby girl.”

“As you wish, my little vixen. I love you, Cassandra. More than my own life.”

I know he does. “You won’t be paying that price.” I kiss him again. “At least for tonight,” I add. Gotta keep a man on his toes. “Unless you forget that tart.” I shrug and send another smile his way.

We pull up to the emergency entrance at the hospital. Luke begins to open the door, but I stop him. “I love you, Luke. Thank you for the wonderful life we share. Thank you for seeing me before I even saw myself. Most of all, no matter what I say during this delivery, thank you for giving me this baby.”

Before he can reply, my next contraction takes hold. “I will bury you where no one will ever find you!” I yell as he helps me out and rushes me into the emergency department. “I will end you, Luke.” I grip his shirt in my fists and stare up into his eyes. “End you!”

“As long as I’m with you, I won’t mind one bit.” He scoops me into his arms and carries me inside, our little family springing to life and our future brighter than I ever thought possible.

I’ll get around to killing him later. Much later. *Maybe never?* ... Well, let’s not be *too* hasty.

LOAN SHARK'S OBSESSION

LOAN SHARK'S OBSESSION

MINK

I know a priceless object when I see it. Always have. It's a gift, or perhaps a curse. The moment I get a glimpse of Laura, I get the same feeling as when I see a stolen work of art from a master. It's real. Authentic. And it makes everything inside me hunger to possess her. But Laura can't be bought, and she's turned me down every time I've approached her for nothing more than a date. Giving up isn't an option, not when I've found a woman so rare, so I call in all of her brother's loans. She'll offer herself to save him, and I'm just the sort of man to take advantage. And I do. I take it all. But I also want to give her something I've never offered to anyone else. When she finds out who I really am, will she accept my heart or leave me empty handed?

“*T*hanks for the ride.” I huff out a breath and hope I’m not late. I’ll never hear the end of it, and Star will make my night horrible. I think she looks for reasons to be mean to me. I have no idea what I ever did to that woman. If anything, she should be the happiest freaking woman in the world.

“Is that piece of shit done for?” I hold my breath as he glances at me before taking a sharp left to try and avoid the traffic on the strip. He’s not the best driver, but beggars can’t be choosers when you’re bumming a ride. It’s still early, but there’s always traffic in Vegas.

“I hope not. Betsy has been with me forever.” I love that little Beetle. Until today she was always the one thing I could rely on to be there for me. But she only coughed and sputtered when I turned the key this time.

“I’m surprised the thing made it this long. Get something new.”

Ah. It’s not as if I can run out and pick up a new car. Maybe Scott could, but there’s still a good chance it would be stolen. Which makes me stop and think for a minute that this car could be stolen for all I know. I’m not asking because I’d rather not know, and I need the ride.

“You want me to see if I can get someone to look at it?”

I hesitate for a moment, not sure if I should take him up on the offer. I hate asking for favors, and I definitely hate feeling as though I owe someone something. Yet I know right now I

don't really have many other options. Money is tight, and without that car I won't be able to get to work. So, I decide to suck it up and take him up on his offer.

"That would be great." He pulls into the back lot. "Over there." I point to the side door. I've got a few minutes to spare.

"Is she here tonight?" He nods toward the casino.

"If I'm here she's here." Instead of dropping me off at the door I pointed to, he pulls into a parking spot.

"Scott." I groan.

"She likes me." He shrugs and gets out of the car. Every girl in the world likes him. Not only is my brother handsome, but he's also charming. Let's not forget that he's also a giant whore and has heartbreak written all over him. That never stops the girls from flocking to him, though. They can't see who he really is until it's too late.

Even Star has fallen under my brother's spell a few times. I would think if anyone were immune, it would be her. Star is breathtaking. It's why her burlesque shows are sold out every night. She gets a few offers of marriage each week. Men who can't stop confessing their undying love for her. I think that's the problem. She sees my brother as a challenge. She thinks she can get him to stay. She thinks she'll be the one to tame him and that he'll change for her. It's the same mistake that each and every one of them make. There's a reason he's still single.

Scott follows me to the side door. I swipe my badge, and he follows me in. I shove all my stuff in a locker before I make my way toward Star's dressing room to see what she needs me to do first tonight. Because she *always* needs something.

Even if she doesn't need anything, she'll make something up to make my life miserable. My job is to keep her happy. This is no easy task. Star might be one of the prettiest women I've ever seen in person, but her insides do not match. I always wonder what makes someone so beautiful also so angry.

I do a double knock before I start to open her door. "You're late," she snaps.

I'm not, but there's no point in correcting her. It would only make my life more miserable, and I need this job.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry be-" She stops talking. Her eyes flick over my head, and immediately her demeanor changes at the sight of Scott. A slow smile spreads across her face. She doesn't even try to cover it up. It doesn't even faze her that she's standing there in a pair of red panties. To be fair, that's what she wears on stage most of the time. So, she's used to people seeing her like that.

"Hey, Star." My brother slips past me and drops onto the sofa, making himself right at home.

"Here." Star goes over to her vanity and picks up some papers. "Handle this." I take them from her, knowing she wants me to get lost. I give my brother a half smile before I dip out, while trying not to gag.

I go through the list and get to work. I venture to the front of the showroom to ask the box office what tonight's list is like. Star always wants to know if there are any high rollers in attendance. I look out the doors that lead to the casino with all its flashing lights. I wonder if he's here.

For two weeks I've been running into the same man on the casino floor whenever I go out to run an errand. Each time he asks me out and each time I say no. He doesn't get mad, only smiles and says he'll see me around. I wipe my hands on my jeans. I'm feeling nervous, or maybe it's excitement.

I don't know why he keeps asking me out. I turn into a blushing schoolgirl who can barely form sentences when I'm around him. The man is ungodly sexy in this rough way. He's always in a custom suit, but for some reason I think if he rubbed his hands across my skin they would be rough. My arms break out with goosebumps thinking about it. Everything is dark when it comes to him, from his eyes to his hair. Even the aura around him feels dark whenever I get close to him. I'm not sure if it's because of the power he exudes or something else.

I could go in the back way, but of course I find myself pushing out into the casino. The sounds of slot machines and people cheering fill the air. I look around, but don't see anyone. Why am I doing this? I'm going to tell him no. I don't date. *Ever*. Still, it's flattering that a man like him keeps asking me out.

"Laura." I suck in a breath at the deep rumble of his voice. I swear that him only saying my name makes my heart give a little flutter. I turn around to see him walking toward me. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes," I answer, confused as to why he would ask me that. Even if my answer isn't true. Everything isn't okay. I'm pretty sure I lost Betty today. "Okay." I stop breathing when he runs his finger across my jaw.

"I didn't know something could be so soft."

I open my mouth, but no words come out. I can't explain the feeling running through my body either. He's never touched me before. I can't tell if I should smack him or lean into his hand.

"Laura! What are you doing?" Star hisses at me. "I need coffee to function and you need to see to my list." I thought I had time.

From how angry she is right now, she must've done something to piss my brother off, and he left her high and dry. Now I'll be paying for that.

"Sorry, I'm coming." I look back to my mystery man, who is now glaring at Star. I become extremely aware that she's only in her heels and a thin silk robe, with very little underneath. A moment of jealousy hits me when I see him staring her down. Which is totally ridiculous.

"Later." I give him a small smile, feeling embarrassed I got in trouble in front of him.

"Who is that?" Star asks when I go to walk past her.

"I don't know his name."

She smiles. "Well then. I'll go find out. You get to work." I watch her stroll toward him. Not wanting to watch this play

out or deal with the hurt I feel, I head back to get Star's coffee.
I add my mystery man to the list of the things I've lost today.

Laura is gone, and I make quick work of the harpy in the thin robe.

“Don’t you want to watch my show?” she asks and runs her fingers down the lapel of my suit.

“No.” I don’t waste any more words on her as I step around her pouting lips and wide eyes. I came here for Laura. The same way I’ve come here for Laura for the past few months.

I spotted her by chance when I came to visit my friend Brock, who happens to own the entire casino, hotel, and half the town. The other half is mine.

She was running around trying to collect various items from the bar, one of the food vendors, and a handful of others when she bumped into me. Does she even remember that day? I do. It’s seared into my brain. She was a butterfly floating from flower to flower until she landed on me. An island of stone. And ever since that moment, I’ve desired her above everything else.

I know when I find something priceless. Something that I will do anything and everything to have. It’s a talent I’ve always possessed. Growing up in the gutter, that talent proved useful in deciding who to trust and what items to steal. Now? I use it to continue building my empire while destroying anyone who gets in my way.

Pushing past the lifers at the slot machines and the cloud of cigarette smoke that lingers like smog over LA, I enter the front office of the burlesque show.

TJ waves me inside. Most of the employees know me—or, more accurately, they know to let me do what the fuck I want or shit will get real. I enter the side hallway, the one where I have the best view of my little butterfly as she flits from task to task.

She's standing still for only a moment, her eyes glued to the list that infernal woman gives her every night before the show. Laura nods as she checks off each task, then she makes a strangled sound.

"The shoes!" she cries, then turns and darts toward the casino door.

I return to the smoky den and watch her rush down the main aisle, her shoes squeaking on the polished marble. A pit boss gives her a raised eyebrow as she hurtles toward the high-end boutiques around the overdone marble fountain that Brock favors. I follow, using the whirring and blinking machines to hide my tall frame.

In record time, she rushes back out, a shoebox in her hands. Then, when she's at the center of the casino, a server steps out with a tray full of watered-down drinks.

"Shit." I rush toward Laura.

She hits the server, the drinks go flying, and the server falls back against a bubble craps machine. Laura isn't so lucky. She's about to smack hard into the marble when I catch her by the arm and pull her up just before she hits.

A small shriek rips from her as I pull her close and hold her until she regains her balance.

Looking up, her eyes widen. "You."

"Would you like to go on a date with me?" I ask her again. This is her last chance. I don't tell her that, of course. No reason to bell the cat, as they say. But if she doesn't agree this time, I'm afraid I can't let this go on. She's too valuable to me, though I'm not quite sure why yet. But the tickling sensation at the back of my brain has never been wrong. She's priceless. That means she's mine. I want her to come on her own. But that might not be an option.

“I, um... I think I ...”

“Say yes.” I grip her chin lightly and tilt her head back. She’s so beautiful, but she doesn’t realize it. She’s taken Star’s words to heart, every negative comment settling inside her like a weight. I want to lift them all for her, carry her worries away. But she has to give me a chance first.

She sucks in a breath, and her gaze goes to my lips for a split second.

“Do you need a kiss to decide?” I lean closer. “I’ll happily give you a sample to make your decision easier.”

Her cheeks flame, her eyelashes fluttering as I move closer still. The noisy, smoky, boozy casino fades, and it’s just us. She has to make the choice. And if she chooses correctly, my plan can wait. If not, well ... I’m not a man who’s used to being denied. Not in business or otherwise.

“Say yes,” I whisper, my lips only a prayer away from hers.

Her mouth opens slightly, her tongue darting out, smoothing the way for the word I want to hear.

“Laura!” the dancer shrieks from the stage door. “Where the fuck are my shoes?”

The spell breaks, and the entire casino comes back to life around us.

“I have to go.” Laura steps from my hold and swipes the shoes from the floor, then finishes her mad dash across the casino. “Here! I have them right there.” Laura hands them to Star, who snatches them away.

“You’re trying to ruin my show. I’ll be late for curtain you clueless moron!” Star is all seething anger, but I see right through it. She’s jealous. So jealous of my Laura with her big eyes, skin dusted with freckles, and hair that shines from any angle.

Laura drops her chin; she doesn’t see Star’s anger for what it is. Just that movement alone makes me want to rip Star’s wig right the fuck off and give her a kick in the ass that sends her skidding right out of this casino *and* this town. But I don’t.

I stand my ground. Star storms off, still screeching about being late, though curtain is still half an hour away.

And when Laura looks back at me, it's with a sadness that I know I can remedy. And I will very soon.

Laura steps through the stage door and closes it.

I pull out my phone and make a call to a certain one of my bookies.

It looks like someone's debts are about to come due in a big way. How unfortunate.

I pocket my phone and stroll from the casino with a whistle on my lips and a fire in my heart.

I stand in the dollar section of the pharmacy debating how I want to spend the five dollars I'm allowing myself. It's my one day off, and I'm going to try to enjoy it. I don't even allow myself to think about how Betty might be doing. I don't want to fret about it until I find out what the damage is. Thing is, I'm not sure it really matters. I can't afford anything at this point. I also know there's no way that I can manage without having a car.

I glance down the aisle and notice a man in a suit standing in front of the female care products. Poor guy. I go back to making my very important choices. I decide on a face mask as the first one before grabbing two nail polishes, too. One is a soft pink and the other so bright it almost appears neon.

I stare at the bath bomb longingly. I can't remember the last time I had the luxury of soaking in a bathtub or even having one at all. I grab a face scrub and some peach lotion before I make my way to the front of the store to check out. The man in the suit is now behind me. I steal a glance over my shoulder, expecting to see him with some female products, but he doesn't have any pads or tampons. I guess he chickened out.

I always thought it was odd that men get weirded out about buying such things. I never understood why it was a big deal. It's the same as buying any other product in the store. I mean, no one thinks that they're using them personally. Men need to get over themselves when it comes to this.

I'm obviously still holding on to the grudge of the time I thought I was dying when I was fourteen and Scott would not pick any up for me. When I asked, he looked at me as if I had two heads.

"Next," the cashier calls. I set my basket down and check out with my few items before making my way to the bakery by my house. Tracy smiles at me when I enter. She doesn't need to ask what I want. I'm here every Tuesday.

I always get the same thing. A double chocolate brownie and one large hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. It doesn't matter if it's a hundred degrees outside, I still get it. I'm addicted to the chocolate creamy goodness, and it's the one indulgence I always allow myself.

I pull out the five dollars and six cents and place it down on the counter for her. As always, the place is slammed. A few minutes later, she drops my bag and my cup down for me before grabbing the cash off the counter.

I push out of the store to head back home. It would be nice if on one of my days off the heat would let up and I could go to the park or something. Instead I'm holed up in my five-hundred square foot apartment.

I take the alley between Gino's Italian Cuisine and the laundromat. It leads to the back door of my apartment. I fumble with my stuff to try and get my keys out. I scream when I drop my hot chocolate and it splatters all over my leg.

I grit my teeth and wait for the pain to fade. It doesn't. I shove my key in the lock and open the door to the stairs that go straight to my place over Gino's. I think at one time this was meant to be an office or something. It's tiny, but I don't need a lot of room. More than anything, it's cheap, and I'm not in the worst area of town.

When I get upstairs, I drop everything onto the small table before grabbing a hand towel to try and clean off my legs. I cringe when I see red welts already starting to form. I bite my bottom lip when it starts to tremble. I will *not* cry. It's only a few small burns and a lost hot chocolate. I suck in a breath and go over to the table to sit down. Why can't I have one day

where I don't have to worry about anything? When everything goes the way it's supposed to? The tears threaten even more.

I really should have taken the handsome man from the casino up on that date. One nice night out sounds heavenly. Would he dote on me?

"That's pathetic," I tell myself when my mind lingers on the thought of him taking care of me.

You need to take care of yourself. I give myself a hard nod, which shakes a couple of useless tears free. I know it wouldn't only be a night out when it came to that handsome stranger. He has heartbreak written all over him. I have this weird tendency to get attached to things and obsess over them. I have no control over it. Kind of like brownies and hot chocolate. It's always the same.

My phone buzzes from inside my purse. Only two people have my number. My brother and Star.

"Hey," I answer.

"I don't think she can be saved." At least Scott sounds mildly apologetic.

I close my eyes. "It would cost more than the whole car is worth to fix it."

I nod. Another tear slips from my eye that I quickly wipe away. I knew it was coming, but still I was holding on to one small piece of hope. How can all my luck be bad? Shouldn't something good get to slip in there every now and then?

"Laura?"

"I'm here."

"I'm going to have them scrap it."

"No!"

"Why? I might be able to get a couple hundred from the parts."

"Can I think about it?"

"Why? It's—"

“Please?” I cut him off.

“Fine.” He gives. “I’ll be right out,” Scott shouts to someone. “Gotta go, sis.” He ends the call before I can say goodbye. I toss my phone across the room and cringe when it hits the ground. Great. A broken phone is the last thing I need.

The screen looks okay when I pick it up. I toss it on the sofa this time. My eyes linger on the windows across the street. The same man from the store is standing out on the sidewalk staring at my building. Yikes. I pull the curtain closed.

Great. Not only is it a shit day, but some weirdo is following me. I groan and fall onto the couch, where I let myself have a good cry until I start to get tired. I close my eyes and picture the man from the casino, making me smile. This time I kiss him. It’s only a dream. In dreams, you can have anything. It’s something that I can hold on to, and no one can take it away from me. And today out of all days, I need something to hold on to.

I’m almost asleep when I hear a knock on the door.

I groan and pull myself off the couch. If it’s Gino wanting the rent, and I’m certain it is, he’s two days early. I mean, that’s what a grace period is for, right?

“Listen, Gino—” I pull the door open, then I scream. But the sound is quickly cut off by duct tape, a black hood over my head, and me being thrown over the weirdo’s shoulder as he carries me down the stairs and stuffs me in what I’m certain is a trunk, though it’s oddly soft and cushy, as if there’s a down comforter beneath me.

I’m a goner. And the worst part is, I didn’t even get to have my hot chocolate as my last meal.

XAVIER

She's shivering, fear all over her like a fine perfume.

I want to tell her I tried to do this in a more direct fashion, tried to entice her any number of ways, but none of it worked. So this is the way it has to be.

One of Fat Tommy's minions drags her brother Scott into the room.

"Guys, look, I'm good for it, okay?" Her brother tries his usual sweet talk, but that only works on burlesque dancers, not on paid muscle.

The guard shoves him into a chair, then eases Laura into her own seat. Good. She's the prize here. Her brother, though, roughing him up isn't a concern of mine.

"You know why you're here." Fat Tommy stands from his seat behind a grubby desk in his office. A building that used to be a liquor store to the rich and famous back in the '60s is now a deserted eyesore just south of the Strip, the location where Fat Tommy takes bets and does business. All under my watchful eye.

I run most of the bookies in this town. He's one of my best earners. Maybe that's why Scott picked him, because I can tell when I look at the boy that he has never once in his life danced with Lady Luck. He's a loser. Not in the general sense, but literally. Nothing he touches will ever turn to gold.

My eyes flick to Laura, who's mumbling beneath the black bag over her head.

When the guard pulls it away, I grit my teeth. He's taped her mouth. That wasn't his instruction. It'll hurt when it's pulled off. He'll pay for every ounce of pain he gives her.

"What's she doing here?" Scott tries to rise, but another guard shoves him down and keeps him in his seat.

"Hey!" Laura yells when the tape is pulled off. "What is this?" Her eyes wide, she looks around and focuses on Fat Tommy. "Scott, what's going on?"

"Scott is in trouble, little girl." Fat Tommy—who might weigh 100 pounds soaking wet—leans against his desk and crosses his arms. "He owes."

"I told you I'm working on it. I'm getting \$200 tomorrow."

Fat Tommy barks a laugh. "That doesn't even make a dent."

"That's the money from my car." Laura turns to Scott.

"I know. I'm sorry." He reaches for her bound hands with his.

"It doesn't matter. You need money? Why didn't you *say* something?"

"I didn't want you to worry." Scott shakes his head, his dark blond hair falling into his eyes. "It's not a big deal."

"Twenty large is a big deal to me, Scott." Tommy tsks.

"Twenty thousand dollars?" Laura's voice rises with each word, her eyes widening. "We don't have that! How did you even have enough to begin with to dig a hole like that?"

"Calm down." Scott manages to grab her hands with his. "Come on, sis, it's not that bad."

She opens her mouth, but no sound comes out. She just stares at him, shocked.

I can answer her questions—all of them, in fact. Usually, Scott wouldn't have access to enough money to bet and lose it plus more to get into a 20 thousand dollar hole. But thanks to a streak of luck at my friend's casino, Scott managed to win just enough money to be dangerous. And then? Then he did what I knew he'd do. He thought luck was on his side, when in fact

I'd rigged the system to get him the seed money that led to his doom. And now here we are.

"Look, I can get you the money, Fat Tommy," Scott pleads. "I don't know why you brought her into this."

"Collateral." Fat Tommy shrugs his bony shoulders.

"She's a person, not a car or a house." He has the nerve to sound indignant. "You can't leverage Laura."

"She's valuable." Fat Tommy's tone is clear, his intent lecherous.

I don't like it. Once again, he isn't following my instructions to the letter. Perhaps I've been too lax with discipline on his part of my operation. That will change tonight.

"Don't look at her like that." Scott finally shows some backbone as he tries to stand.

"Hey, pretty little girl." Tommy steps closer to Laura and ignores Scott. "What's a kiss worth?"

"What?" Laura blinks.

I can't tell if she's horrified or confused.

"Stop," Scott growls. He knows exactly what's going on.

I'm fucking livid. Fat Tommy will bleed for even making that suggestion.

"Ten dollars? More?" Fat Tommy rubs his hands together. "A sweet piece of ass like you, a kiss might be a hundred dollars? How's that sound? You can help your brother right now. Work off some of his debt. I'll pay one hundred for a kiss, but if you *really* want to help him, you'll have to give me more." He licks his lips.

My hands fist. Fat Tommy is an earner, but he's expendable, and he's walking a fucking fine line. Laura is *mine*.

"You're disgusting." She spits at him.

That's the fire I'm after, the spark I saw inside her when we first met.

"If you touch me, I'll kick your dick off!" she adds.

I smirk at her phrasing.

Fat Tommy shrugs and backs off.

I relax just a hair.

“Well, if you won’t work off your brother’s debt, just what are we going to do with the two of you? I can’t let you go on not paying.” Fat Tommy sighs. “So I guess we’ll have to make an example out of you.” He jerks his chin at one of his goons. “Dirk, get the saw.”

“What?” Laura shrieks.

“Circular or jig?” Dirk asks.

Fat Tommy rolls his right shoulder. “Let’s use the jig on him, the circular’s so hard to control when it gets bloody that it hurts my joints. Grip’s all slippery. Dangerous, really. I could mess up and cut my *own* leg off.” He shakes his head and chuckles.

“Oh my God.” All the blood drains from Laura’s face. “You aren’t serious.”

“Oh, I am, little girl.” He points at Dirk. “Get the tarp, too.”

“Wait!” she cries.

Fat Tommy turns back to her. “What is it, little girl?”

“Laura, no.” Scott shakes his head. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” She throws up her bound hands. “They’re going to cut off a limb! I can’t let that happen. Look, Mr. Fat Tommy, we can work this out.”

“Can we?” Fat Tommy moves toward her again.

I grit my teeth.

“Yes, I’ll um, I’ll ...”

“Laura, don’t. Don’t do anything. I’ll be okay. He’s just bluffing about the saw thing and—” The other guard gags Scott as Dirk returns with a blue tarp under one arm and a jigsaw in his other hand.

“Okay, you can do what you want with me!” Laura cries. “Just don’t hurt him!”

“I was gonna do that anyway, little girl.” Fat Tommy laughs.
“And besides, even if your pussy’s worth 20 large, I don’t have that kind of money.”

Dirk fumbles with the power outlet, but finally gets the saw plugged in. It makes a nice zzzzzz sound, the blade sawing up and down.

Laura screams.

Finally. That’s my cue.

LAURA

The sound of the saw buzzing is one I'll never forget. I scream. I know it's pointless, but the thought of that saw harming Scott or me is too much. How did I get here? Tears begin to take over. I've never felt more helpless. Scott fights to try and free himself.

Today, I'm going to lose something. I just have to hope it's not my life or my brother's. I think it's going to be something much worse. Knowing that my first kiss will be with Fat Tommy isn't sitting well. I'm going to throw up.

"Off!"

My head jerks to the door when the booming order echoes through the room. A large figure fills the dark space. I wonder what this guy's nickname is if they're calling that little guy Fat Tommy.

The buzzing stops instantly.

I swallow. Did this somehow just get worse?

"Let her go!" Scott keeps fighting to break free.

"You're hurting yourself," I hiss at him. His hands are starting to turn purple.

I suck in a breath when the man steps into the room. My heart starts to race. I know that build. Not many men are built like my casino man. He's not only well over six feet, but he's broad and thick all over. But it can't be him. I'm hallucinating that he's come to save me.

“Laura.”

I close my eyes. There’s no mistaking that voice. This isn’t happening. I’m still asleep on my sofa. I scream when I hear a loud *whack*. My eyes fly open. Nope, I’m awake.

“Fuck.” Fat Tommy sways on his feet and almost falls on his ass. He holds his hand to his nose. Blood gushes from it. I stare in shock. This keeps on getting weirder and weirder.

“Tape?” casino man grits out to Tommy.

Tape? Oh God, there’s a tape? Is he mad over some recording?

“She would have screamed if he hadn’t done it. Fuck, Mr. Vincent.”

Casino man—Mr. Vincent, I guess—turns his gaze on me. He drops a large duffel bag on the floor.

It makes me jump.

He stares at my mouth. I fight not to lick my lips, but I lose the battle and wet them.

“Does it hurt?” His dark eyes narrow just a hair.

I stare up at him. Does what hurt? No, better yet what the hell is he doing here? My head starts to spin.

“Your mouth, does it hurt?”

I shake my head. It’s then I realize he’s talking about the tape that was over my mouth. It *does* hurt, but I keep that to myself. I’m not sure I can talk at this point. Nothing is making sense.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Mr. Vincent levels Scott with a glare.

Thankfully, for once, Scott shuts up. He’s not getting us anywhere good by talking. None of them are listening to him. Everything keeps coming back to me, like this is my fault.

“I’m the man with the twenty grand you need.”

The duffel bag. Is it full of cash? How did this man just happen to show up with twenty grand in a bag? I stare up at his handsome face. In the dim light of the room, he looks more like a villain than anything. A hot one, but still a villain.

“Why?” My voice cracks. My throat hurts from the screaming.

“Does the why really matter right now? You made your deal, and I’m going to be the one collecting.”

He can’t be serious.

“What the fuck does that mean? You’re buying my sister?”
Scott starts struggling again.

I fist my shaking hands. Tommy makes an *mmp* sound as he tries to stop the blood. Wait. Did Mr. Vincent hit him because of the tape over my mouth?

“Tommy, I’ll remove your fucking eyes if you look at her again.”

I cringe. My stomach drops. Tommy stops looking at me immediately. He’s actually scared Mr. Vincent will follow through with his threat. I shouldn’t be grateful for this, but I am. Scott is once again quiet.

I gasp and close my eyes when Mr. Vincent pulls out a knife. Is he going to kill Tommy?

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

I open one eye. He’s right in front of me now, so close I could reach out and touch him.

“Yeah, because you just paid twenty grand for her, you sick bastard.”

Mr. Vincent raises his other hand, prepared to slap the shit out of Scott.

“Please don’t.”

Mr. Vincent stares at me, then slowly drops his hand.

“She saved you.” Mr. Vincent slides the knife through the plastic zip ties and frees my hands. I jerk them to my chest and rub my sore wrists. Tommy snags the bag off the ground and takes it over to the man who’s still holding the saw. He grumbles as he puts the torture tool down, clearly crestfallen he didn’t get to use it.

Mr. Vincent points at Scott. “This is how this is going to work. Laura comes with me.”

“Hell no!” Scott again tries to get free.

“Knock it off.” If my choice right now is between Fat Tommy and Mr. Vincent, I’ll take Mr. Vincent. Or maybe I should be worried that Tommy is scared of him.

“She’s collateral. When you come up with the twenty grand I paid for her, you can come and get her.”

“No deal!” Scott shouts.

“Dirk,” Mr. Vincent says, though he keeps his eyes on mine.

Dirk grins, and the saw comes back to life.

“Deal. It’s a deal!” I shout. “Please turn it off. I can’t take it.” I drop my head, tears sliding down my face.

The saw stops, and I can feel Dirk’s disappointment even if I can’t see it.

“Laura, don’t do this.”

I shake my head. “There’s no choice.”

“There is! I can get us out of this.”

“Yeah, by losing a limb. I’m not letting that happen.” I lift my head to look at him. “You’re all I have.”

“Shit, Laura.”

Mr. Vincent holds his hand out for me. I stare at the roughness of his palm that doesn’t go with his fancy suits. I hate that my hand shakes as I put it into his.

“Laura, I’m sorry.” Scott sounds defeated. Then he gets back on his usual bullshit. “If you hurt her, I don’t care who you are, I’ll burn you down!”

Mr. Vincent pulls me to my feet. My legs are weak and not ready to stand. I fall into his chest. He wraps an arm around me, pulling me even closer. Why does he have to smell so good?

“Did Tommy scare you?” He asks it so gently, nothing like the tone he’s used so far.

I nod. How could I have not been scared?

“Do you want me to kill him?” That same gentle tone.

“Mr. Vincent!” Fat Tommy squawks. “Man. All I did—”

“Shut up.” Mr. Vincent’s demeanor turns lethal and makes my skin break out in goosebumps. “Now, tell me, do you want me to ki—”

“No. I don’t want anyone to die.”

“But he should pay?”

I want to say yes. I don’t. What kind of game is he playing?

“You want me to scare him like he scared you?”

I find myself nodding.

He smirks. Then his mouth is on mine in a hard kiss that’s over as quickly as it started. “Pay attention, precious. So you can see what happens when someone else touches something that belongs to me.”

This time I don’t close my eyes.

She keeps glancing at my knuckles, but she doesn't ask the question I can feel lingering on the tip of her tongue.

"Yes, they're sore. No, it doesn't bother me. Don't worry about it." I flex my hands on the steering wheel as we speed toward my estate in The Ridges.

She swallows hard and keeps lacing and unlacing her fingers.

I know she has questions, but she probably won't like my answers, so maybe it's better if we keep the silence goin—

"Why were you there? What's going on? Is this some sort of human trafficking thing?" Her questions all run together into a mosh, but I catch them.

I glance at her. She looks away. But then I feel her gaze return as she studies my profile.

"Fat Tommy is a popular bookie. I do some business with him." All true. Vaguely. "I was there on business."

"You carry \$20,000 on business?" She winces back, as if thinking I might strike her for the skepticism in her tone.

"Don't be afraid of me." I take a hairpin turn on the edge of the sharp ridge that leads to my home.

She gapes. "How can I *not* be? You just bought me! Like a damn pony! Are you going to sell me into sex slavery or make me be your little Cinderella maid or, or ...or ...?" Her eyes widen and she pinches her lips together as her eyes water.

“I won’t hurt you.” I want to reach for her hand, but she’s busy doing the lace-unlace-lace-unlace.

“Then let me go!”

“No. Don’t ask that of me. Ask for anything else, and there’s a good chance you’ll get it. But don’t ask me to let you go.”

“Why?” She throws her hands up, and I catch her left one in my right.

“Because you’re mine.”

“You’re crazy!” She doesn’t pull her hand away.

I don’t care if it’s out of fear or surprise, I’m just glad to finally touch her like this. “Not at all. You’re the one who offered the deal. I’m the one who took it. Doesn’t that make *you* the crazy one?”

“I would do anything to save my brother. You took advantage of a bad situation and—”

“That jigsaw would’ve definitely left a mark.” I smirk as we roll up to the gate to my property. Slowing, I wait for it to open completely.

That’s when she makes her move. With a jolt she yanks her hand from mine, throws her door open, and runs.

Fuck, this is going to be fun. I throw the car into park and jump out, racing after her over the scrub sage and rocky dirt. She doesn’t get far.

When I tackle her, I pull her tight into my arms and turn so my body absorbs the impact from the fall. Then I roll her onto her back and pin her. My cock is already harder than the desert bedrock beneath us when we come to a stop.

Pinning her to the ground, I steal another kiss, her mouth perfect for plundering even as she struggles and bucks beneath me. When she opens her mouth to scream, I dart my tongue inside, caressing her and tasting her more fully.

I pull back, both of us breathless.

“Let me go!”

“No.” I can feel the heat between her legs, and my cock demands I explore more, taste her in every way. But not yet. Not until she wants everything I have to offer.

“I’ll scream.” She sucks in a big breath.

“I own the land out here for miles. It’s the biggest estate in The Ridges. I’m afraid no one can hear you.”

She belts out a cry anyway.

I get up. She scrambles to her knees, then ignores my hand as she gets to her feet. She looks wild, her hair curling around her face, her skin with a fine sheen on it, and a shifty look in her eyes. She wants to run again. Before she can, I bend over and toss her over my shoulder, then turn and carry her back to the car.

She beats on my back and uses some exceptional curse words she must’ve learned at the burlesque as I carry her past the car, down the winding drive, and into my clifftop home. Once I set her in the foyer, she looks around—likely for a weapon—and I return to the door.

“Make yourself at home, precious. I’ve got to park my car.”

“You bastard!” She crosses her arms over her stomach and looks around at the art and the clear ceiling that always gives an amazing view of the starry sky.

“The house is inescapable. You may go wherever you please, including to the pool and the garden, but if you stray beyond the garden walls, I’ll know. I have guards throughout the estate, and they’re all paid quite well. You’ll be brought back to me every time. The pool is infinity, of course, but don’t let it fool you. If you try to jump over the edge, a fifty-foot drop onto some particularly sharp stones awaits you. Don’t do it.” Hmm, maybe I should have a net installed down there just in case.

“You can’t keep me here.”

“I can. And here’s the thing, precious.” I walk closer to her, and she leans back to meet my gaze. “Like I said before, *you* made this deal. If you break it, I’ll return to Fat Tommy and get my money back. If that happens, it won’t be long before

Scott and the jigsaw become acquainted on a deeply personal level. Understand?"

"You're a monster." Her lip trembles.

"Maybe so. But you belong to the monster now. I paid full price. Keep that in mind." I want to kiss her again, but she looks like she might bite me if I tried it.

"You can't do this." Her voice is a near-whisper.

It's already done.

"I'll make dinner when I get back." I close the door and hear the locks click into place.

She darts deeper into the house, likely seeking a weapon or a foolish escape. There is none. She's here until she realizes I'm the one for her, until she knows the same thing I do—that we're meant to be. It doesn't matter how long it takes. Though, if my cock is any indication, I hope it's soon, because I'm desperate to give her a taste of everything I have to offer.

LAURA

I huff in annoyance when I can't find anything I can use to kill Mr. Vincent. I fall back onto the giant bed and look up at the canopy. I'd cry, but I don't think I have any tears left. More than anything, anger is starting to creep in on me. I might actually follow through with my murder plan if I could only find a weapon.

At first I hid in a closet, but hiding always makes me have to pee. So then I went to a bathroom—a really nice one with marble and the prettiest tile I've ever seen—and kept exploring. The doors are locked, windows don't open, and there's nowhere to go but down a steep hillside. So then I hid in yet another closet, but when no one came to drag me out, I continued going from room to room. Now I'm just lying in this bed waiting to be murdered, I guess.

I'm never going to understand what's going on here. There's not a single reason this man should want to keep me here. He said he's not going to sell me or turn me into Cinderella. Then exactly what does he plan on doing with me? I bite my lip. It can't be about sex either. There's no way that man can't get laid if he wants to. It would be crazy for him to kidnap or *buy* someone for such a thing.

“Oh, sorry, miss. I didn't know you were here.”

I sit up to see a dark-haired woman coming out of the bathroom. She looks to be in her early forties, if I had to guess. She's got a stack of fluffy white towels in her hands. She's very pretty. I bet he could sleep with her.

“Are you kidnapped, too?”

She lets out a small laugh. “I’m Della. I work here, and I rather enjoy my job, so don’t get any ideas about me helping you leave.”

There goes that idea.

“He kidnapped me!”

She shrugs.

“Is this normal around here or something?”

“No.”

I stare at her, willing her to say more.

“He’s a good man, won’t harm a hair on your head.”

“I don’t think good men steal women.”

“Maybe we have different ideas of what makes a good man. And I have it on good authority that *you* were the one who made such a deal.”

I purse my lips. Everyone is crazy today, and I’m starting to think I’m going over the edge too.

“It will be okay. You’re different.” Her face goes soft. “Xavier doesn’t bring anyone here unless they’re in his inner circle. Even then, most don’t make it past his office. Whereas you’ve been roaming the house for an hour, opening every door and drawer as you go.”

“Xavier? I thought his name was Vincent.”

“Xavier Vincent,” she corrects.

“Xavier Vincent.” He’s got a cool name for a stone-cold jerk. “He’s lucky I don’t burn this place down with everyone in it.”

This makes her laugh again. “You’re a terrible liar. I bet you can’t even kill a spider.”

“Why would I? When you can just take it outside.” I never understood people wanting to crush something so small.

“I’m starting to get it.” She cocks her head to the side, and this time it feels like she’s really looking me over. “Don’t fight it.”

The sooner you give in, the sooner you'll both be happy." With that, she heads out the door. "This is the master by the way," she tosses over her shoulder as she exits, leaving me even more confused about this situation than I was before.

I slide off the bed that *does* smell like Mr. Vincent. I think I knew it was his room when I ventured in here. This shouldn't even be called a room. I think it's eight times bigger than my place. Every room in this place is as breathtaking as the last. It makes me wonder who Mr. Vincent really is. Well, besides an extremely handsome kidnapper.

I take off toward the bathroom to peek inside.

"What the hell?" The bathroom is definitely big enough to fit three or four of me in it. Everything is so shiny and white. I itch to go inside. I've never seen a bathtub so big in my life. You could swim in it. I turn and stomp out of the room before I'm tempted to crawl into the tub. I won't give Mr. Vincent the satisfaction of finding me naked in his bedroom.

I descend the stairs, now mad that I can't take a bath. I follow the scent of fresh baked bread into the kitchen. Mr. Vincent is standing at the island. I watch as his big hands make quick work of whatever it is he's chopping. He doesn't look as if he's a stranger to using the blade.

"Come have a seat with me, precious."

I bite the inside of my lip and debate if I should do it. There really isn't anywhere else for me to go. I might be able to get some more information out of him if he thinks I'm cooperating. I walk over and climb up in the chair.

"This is for you." He pushes a mug toward me.

"What's that?"

"I think you know what it is." He lifts an eyebrow.

"Oh my gosh. It's a hot chocolate with extra marshmallows." I wrap my hands around it and pull it to me.

"You like Italian?"

"I'm starting to think you might already know the answer to that, too." I eye the ingredients laid out in front of him.

“I can be a little obsessive about details. If there’s something I want to know about someone, I don’t stop until I know everything.” Obsessive. I can have the same problem if I let myself. I don’t. That’s why I keep everyone at arm’s length.

“You want to know everything about me?” No one’s ever taken that much interest. Not in me. Star, now she has tons of admirers and stalkers. But not me.

“Yes.” A timer goes off. Vincent walks over to the oven and pulls out a loaf of bread. It smells heavenly. The man can cook, too.

“You don’t need to kidnap women. I don’t understand you. You could get anyone you want.” I fold my arms over my chest, not caring that I probably look like a child pouting.

“That’s not true. I remember someone who turned me down a dozen or so times. No matter what approach I took, it never seemed to be the right one. Leaving me with no other options, really.”

“You don’t want to date me. Trust me. I don’t date. I can’t. It’s not my thing. You may as well let me go.” I take a delicious gulp of the perfect hot chocolate.

“You can’t date?” He peers at me, his gaze so direct it’s like a touch.

I shake my head. “No dating.” Why are my cheeks heating? Am I flirting? I should be running, but everything smells good, and on top of it, Mr. Vincent looks amazing in his black button down and black pants. He’s tailored and gorgeous. *And probably planning your murder*, my brain adds.

“So no dating.” He bounces the knife on top of the diced onions, a thoughtful look on his face. “That’s fine.”

Okay, he’s getting it.

“Right, so I should be going.” I take another drink.

“Do you need something more serious? Marriage.” He gives a decisive nod.

I spit out the hot chocolate, splattering it across the white marble counter. I put my hand over my mouth. I did *not* just do

that. My face burns with sheer mortification. I will *not* be embarrassed about this. He kidnapped me. *He* should be embarrassed. Even as I tell myself that, my face only heats more.

He lets out a chuckle and grabs a hand towel to quickly remove my mess.

I lean back in the chair and decide I'm just going to keep my mouth shut for now. I watch as he fills two plates and places one in front of me. He comes around and sits down next to me.

“You want me. That’s why I’m here. You want me for ... dating? For ... more?” It’s all been right there in front of me. Everything is starting to add up now. All the times he asked me out, paying the money today, the kisses, and his erection that brushed against my butt when he tackled me to the ground. He’d been turned on. My body’s reaction to it is not one I was prepared for.

Then there’s the sweet name he keeps calling me. Precious. I hate that every time he says it I get a warm feeling in my stomach. I also got that feeling when he made Tommy pay for what he’d done to me. As messed up as it all was, it felt good to have someone stand up for me. After so many months of taking crap from Star, who is constantly doing mean stuff to me, it felt good for once to get a little payback. Even though it wasn’t done by me, it was done in my name.

Despite these facts lining up right in my face, it’s still hard for me to believe that someone like him wants me. It’s another reason I kept turning him down. He’s so handsome, and clearly rich. I’m just me.

“You need to eat.” He jerks his chin at my plate.

“Answer me, and I’ll eat. Why did you take my offer? Why am I here? Because you want to ...” I swallow hard. “Have sex with me?”

He turns his head, his dark eyes locking with mine. “Want isn’t a strong enough word for what I feel for you.”

I look down at my plate, unable to hold the intensity of his stare.

He's never going to let me go. That much is clear from the look in his eyes.

I should be afraid, and I am, but not enough. Not when there's another emotion at war with my fear. Longing.

She eyes the knife I used to chop the onions.

“Take it.” I gesture toward it with my fork.

“What?” Her eyes widen.

“If you’ll feel better with that smelly knife in your hand, then by all means.” I want her to feel comfortable and safe. If that means she needs a deadly weapon to do it, that’s fine by me.

“What if I kill you with it?”

I try not to smirk. I fail. “I’ll hide my rising fear under a mask of stoicism.”

“I could kill you!” She reaches for it and takes the hilt in her hand. “See?” She brandishes it toward me, but nowhere near me, which is a good thing given she might wind up taking an eye out.

“Yes, you’re a real killer.” I take another bite of penne. “Other than your violent streak and affinity for blades, tell me about you.”

Her face falls a little. “I could be a killer,” she grumbles under her breath. She keeps the knife and retakes her seat. “Me? Nothing to tell, really. High school dropout, assistant to Star, a general nobody just trying to survive.”

That description doesn’t even begin to encompass everything she is. “Do you value yourself so little? I hate to hear it.”

She shrugs. “It’s the truth.” Using her free hand, she tears off a piece of bread and dips it in the olive oil.

“Not at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have value. Priceless, in fact.” I hold her gaze.

“You really think that?” Her eyes start to water.

I reach for her hand. “Oh, precious, I’m sorry. Did that upset you?”

“No. I mean—” She shakes her head, then looks at the knife.

“Oh.” She slides it away from her and back onto the cutting board across the counter. “Onions. They’re kind of strong.”

I hide my smile in another bite of food.

She tears off another piece of bread and adopts an all-business tone. “So what do I have to do for the \$20,000?”

“Straight to the point, aren’t you?”

“I just want to know what you expect.” She takes another bite, and I can’t help but enjoy the fact she likes my cooking. “I’m not going to just lie on back and tell you to draw me like one of your French girls, okay? I’m not that easy. I’m not judging sex work, but I don’t *do* sex work.”

“But you agreed to sell your body to save your brother?”

“That’s different.” She angrily dips her bread into the olive oil.

“That was, what’s the word?”

“A devil’s bargain?”

“Coercion.” She angrily bites her food.

“I’m aware of what sort of woman you are, and I’d never force you.” I reach out and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

“That’s not what this is.”

“Then what is it?”

“All you have to do is stay. Simple as that.”

“All I have to do is stay in this mansion with you?” She looks perplexed but keeps eating.

I suspect she hasn’t had a home-cooked meal in a long, long time.

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

“As long as it takes to what?”

“For you to understand just how priceless you are.”

“That’s not a thing.” She tosses her fork down on her plate. Then, with a sigh, she picks it back up and takes another bite.

“Why is this food so good?”

“My mother’s recipe.”

“She taught you to cook?”

“She taught me a lot. Though I must admit I was a rude boy, always in trouble, running the streets, not giving her the son she deserved.”

“Does she live here with you?” She looks around at the large kitchen and the expansive view of Vegas beyond the wide glass windows.

“She passed.”

“Oh.” She turns back to me, true regret in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I would’ve liked her to meet you.”

“Meeting the parents?” She shakes her head. “Something that dangerous would cost you a lot more than 20 grand, mister.”

I smile, which is something I haven’t done out of true mirth in quite some time. We eat in silence for a little while longer.

Della bustles in, her hands full of packages.

“Let me help.”

She gives me a sour look. “Sit down and eat. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Is that everything?” I eye the pile in her arms.

“From this first delivery, yes.” She keeps walking and disappears into the rest of the house.

“To the master,” I call. “I can help you—”

“No, and I know where everything goes better than you do! Jeez, Xavier,” Della sasses me, as usual.

“She gets to talk to you like that?” Laura seems surprised. “I mean, after what you did to Fat Tommy—” She winces.

“Della’s the only employee I let get away with it. She’s had a hard-enough past that she doesn’t need any shit from me.”

“What do you mean?”

I want to know about Laura, but she’s pulling my past from me instead. “I found her half dead from addiction, lying in a back alley along the strip. I should’ve left her there, but I took her in. She recovered, started working for me, and began a new life. Now she and her wife live in the guest house. Della cleans and fusses over me while Eliana paints and writes.”

Laura’s eyes brighten. “You saved her.”

I roll my shoulders. “I got a valuable employee.”

A rumble sounds from the hallway, and then Della’s harsh curse floats to my ears. “It’s okay, I got it,” she yells.

I rub the bridge of my nose. “Oh, Della.”

“What’s all that stuff?”

“Your things.”

“What?” She cocks her head to the side in an adorably confused way.

“Not your old things. Your apartment is just as you left it,” I explain. “These are new things I thought you might like.”

“You’re giving Dobby a sock?” she asks.

“Come again?”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh my God, I may be a prisoner, but you need to get out more. We need a *Harry Potter*-a-thon, stat. Do you have movies?”

“Harry Potter movies?”

“Yeah.” She grabs my plate and hers and takes them to the sink before I can protest. “We need to watch them.”

“I can get them, sure.”

Sue strolls into the kitchen, her big green eyes on the newcomer.

Laura turns. “We can watch—oh my God!”

Her scream is beyond ear-splitting, and I have some more explaining to do.

*T*urn around and run back to Xavier. He braces himself, probably thinking I'm going to jump into his arms. Fat chance. Instead, I dart behind him and use him as a shield. He'll take longer for the giant beast to eat while I make my getaway. I dig my fingers into the back of his shirt. His whole body is shaking. Is he that scared? Oh my God, we're all going to die.

Wait a minute.

"Are you laughing?" I poke my head around to try and see his face.

His body stops shaking, his face revealing nothing. Then he cracks a smile and lets out another chuckle. I look back over to the beast who's sitting there watching us. It's not a beast. It's a giant freaking cat. It yawns and slides down to the floor to lie down before rolling over onto its side, showing us its belly.

"This is Sue. My cat."

"That's not a cat. It's giant! Is nothing you do normal?"

He shrugs. "She won't hurt you. She's sweet."

I look back at the cat and then to Xavier. I don't think he went through all that trouble to bring me here to only let me get eaten by his oversized cat. Right? From what he's said so far, it's him that wants to do the eating.

"Your cheeks are turning pink, precious. Do you want to tell me what you're thinking about?"

I dart back behind him. “My, uh, face goes pink when I’m scared.”

“No it doesn’t.”

I grit my teeth, having no response to that.

“Do you want to pet her?”

Do I?

“You’ll have to get used to her. She lives here too unless you want me to—”

“Don’t kill her!” I’m back to glaring up at him.

“I was going to say I can keep her locked up in another part of the house. It’s big enough for her to have space in another section.”

Oh. I shake my head no to that, too.

“I’ll pet her.” I step fully out from behind Xavier. Sue rolls over more, really wanting that belly scratch. I grab Xavier’s arm and wrap both of mine around it. I look up at him when he doesn’t move. He’s staring down at me.

“Are we going?”

“You want me to go with you?”

I nod. “Let’s go.” I stay attached to him as we slowly make our way over to her. She really is a beautiful creature.

“What is she?”

“A caracal.”

It’s the biggest cat I’ve ever seen in person. I’m pretty sure this isn’t even legal. She’s a pretty tan color, but in spots her fur looks red, too. Her long legs stick up in the air as she stares at us upside down. I slowly untangle myself from Vincent and go down to my knees. I reach out and let her smell my hand.

She brushes her head against it. I think this is approval. I take it and proceed to give her one long pet down her belly. Her tail starts to flick leisurely.

“Hi Sue. Were you kidnapped, too? Kittennapped?” I snort a laugh at my own joke.

“I found her and couldn’t bring myself to leave her behind.”

I keep petting her. Xavier is so confusing. Ruthless one second, and the next a savior. I gasp as she jumps up onto her feet in one smooth move. She butts her face against mine. I laugh and scratch behind her ear.

“Do you want to watch *Harry Potter* too? Of course you do.”

Vincent offers me his hand to help me get up from the floor.

“It’s late. Why don’t you go get ready for bed? Della has put some of your things away. Feel free to take a shower. This is your home now.”

His words slam me right back into reality. I’m a prisoner here.

“Right.” I turn to leave but stop. “Where is my room?” He gives me a smirk that tells me that I’m not going to like his answer.

“The master.”

“I’m not sleeping with you!”

Sue runs in a circle. “Sorry,” I whisper to her. “You made me scare the cat.”

“It’s a big bed. Stay on your side, and you’ll be fine. But if you venture over to my side...”

“I won’t.” I tilt my chin up, and with a huff I leave the room. “Sue.” I call for the cat.

To my surprise, she actually follows me. I don’t know why I feel smug about this, but I do. At least I have someone who’s on my side in this house. I bet she’d help me escape if she could.

I eye the bed when I make it back to the master. I crawl up and make a line of pillows in the middle of the ginormous bed just to get that out of the way and to make things very clear to Xavier.

Sue watches me as I wander around the room to see where the stuff Xavier was talking about is located. I push open a door and find another closet.

“Holy crap.” It’s not only massive, it’s breathtaking. There is a freaking sitting area off to the side, it’s so big. In the center is a giant island that has drawers all around it. I pull one open and slam it back shut when I see women’s panties. Wait. Those might be for me. I open it again and grab a pair. They’re the softest material I’ve ever felt in my life. Definitely not from the Wal-Mart clearance bin.

I turn back to the wall that’s lined with clothes hanging up. It only takes me a moment to realize the left side of the closet is mine. I run my fingers along the clothes. A knot forms in my throat.

I’ve never worn anything as beautiful and high quality as this stuff. I quickly glance over to the section that has rows of shoes, but I don’t even dare to go over there. I’ll be there for hours if I do. I grab a silk dress that I’m pretty sure is for sleeping and get out of the closet before I burst into tears. Overwhelmed isn’t even a fraction of how I feel.

I pass Sue who’s now lying on my side of the bed as I head into the bathroom. “This is all so crazy.” Her pointed ears twitch as she rumbles a purr.

I look longingly at the bathtub, but there are no freaking doors on the bathroom. I head over to the shower and try to take the fastest one of my life, but the water is so warm, and I didn’t know water pressure like this existed. I reluctantly make myself get out and dress quickly before I towel dry my hair.

“You have things in the drawers on the left side.”

I scream and spin around to find Xavier standing in the opening to the bathroom.

“I could have been naked,” I hiss, but my nipples tighten thinking about him sneaking a look at me because he couldn’t help himself.

“That would’ve been nice.” He smirks before turning to leave.

What have I gotten myself into? I rub my eyes. And where is Scott? He’s got to be worried sick about me, but as long as he’s alive, that’s all that matters. I’m keeping him safe, I

remind myself. I'm a prisoner. I will *not* be seduced by a luxurious house, a good cook, and a sweet cat.

I brush my hair but get lost in all the fancy products Xavier has for me. I don't know what half of them are. I could have my own spa day here if I wanted to.

I flip the light off and head back to the bed. Sue is going along with my pillow wall. By the look on Xavier's face, I would say he's less than pleased with it. He's stretched out on the bed in a pair of gray sweatpants and no shirt. I let my eyes roam that big broad chest of his because I can't help myself. I mean, I'm only human.

"You have this enormous house with plenty of bedrooms, yet you have me sleep in here? Why can't I be next door?"

"Because I want you here." His answer is simple and almost as hard as the body on display before me.

Why does his tone make me warm between my legs? I should be furious.

"Are you coming to bed?" His gaze holds mine, and when he wets his lips, I realize I need to get into this bed and hide behind the pillows. If I don't, he'll see my hard nipples and the color in my cheeks.

I put one knee on the bed and climb in, then hurry under the blanket. "And I'll be staying on my side of the bed. You should do the same."

"If you say so, precious." I turn and give him my back, then huff out a breath. The whole bed smells like him. I close my eyes and try to find sleep.

XAVIER

*G*lance over at her. She's barely visible over the pillow fort she built. As if pillows could stop me from taking what I want. I shake my head minutely. But I'm going to wait, to play this the way she wants. After all, that's what I promised, and I don't break my word.

So I close my eyes and listen to her breathing. She stays awake for a while, the bed moving a little as she reaches down to pet Sue.

The cat has never slept in my bed. She always prefers to prowl the house at night looking for any uninvited scorpions or bugs that have the bad fortune of wandering onto the patio around the pool. But now that Laura is curled up beside me, Sue is more than happy to warm the bed right along with her. On the other side of the pillows with Laura. While I'm over here alone. Not that I'm jealous of the cat. That would be ridiculous.

I turn over and face the pillows, then edge my hand under them. Creeping slowly beneath the barrier until I reach not soft skin, but fur. Sue has become part of the wall. Dammit. She purrs as I tickle her side.

Then I give up and roll to my back.

Closing my eyes again, I try to fall asleep. My cock, though, doesn't play along. It's hard as a fucking rock and demanding attention.

But I won't have any satisfaction tonight. Not with the pillow fort and the feline cockblocking me. I would laugh. Xavier

Vincent in bed with a woman he can't have. I'm known for taking what I want, never giving up, and never stopping until I'm satisfied. But not with Laura. She's different. The most valuable thing I've ever found. I won't jeopardize that.

I rise silently and enter the open bathroom. Leaving the lights off, I turn on the shower.

Glancing back, I check to see if it wakes Laura. She doesn't move, though Sue peeks her little ears over the fort and gives me a look before settling back down.

The water is warm, and I step under the spray, letting it roll down my body. My cock is at attention, the simple touch of the water sending an electric tingle through my spine.

With one more look at my sleeping Laura, I grip my cock and start to stroke myself. Releasing the pressure will help me think instead of lusting after her. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

I lean one hand against the tile wall and let the water soak my hair as I grip my cock and massage the hard flesh. Thinking of Laura, of the way her mouth would fasten perfectly around me. Fuck, I throw my head back as I imagine her eyes meeting mine, the thrust of her tongue against the bottom of my shaft.

With a few more strokes, I'm almost there.

"Laura," I whisper. "Fuck, Laura."

And when I imagine coming in her mouth, my seed dripping down her chin, I come hard, grunting low as I empty myself down the drain while visions of Laura play in my mind.

"Fuuuck," I let my breath out in a rough whisper.

Then I glance over my shoulder to make sure Laura's still—fuck.

"I, uh—" Her eyes are wide, then she turns and runs back to the bed, dives in, and crawls beneath the covers.

I should be embarrassed. I'm not. I want her. I want her mouth around my cock while I come down her throat. I've made no bones about it, and she should know that I intend to pursue her until she gives us what we both want.

After a quick wash, I step out and grab a towel, then return to bed.

She's displaced the pillows, the fort crumbling. Sue is gone, likely doing her nightly patrol.

"Laura, I didn't mean to scare you."

"Not scared," she chirps, her back to me.

I rub the towel over my damp hair then toss it back into the bathroom. "I want you."

"Okay." Another quick reply.

"Laura, look at me."

"I'm good. Sleeping, in fact. I'm asleep right now."

I roll toward her, my body nude and my cock already back on its fucking bullshit. I flip the sheet over me.

"Laura, please?" I ask.

"It's just I'm super sleepy." She slowly rolls toward me, her eyes closed.

But then I see how red her cheeks are, her lips parted, her pulse pounding in the vein at her throat.

She may be a little embarrassed, but she's also turned on. A lot, by the looks of it.

"Can I ask you one question and then you can go to sleep?" I move closer.

She squinches her eyes closed. "Yes."

"And you promise to answer me honestly?" I'm close now, our mouths almost touching. I want her so badly it verges on physical pain.

"And then we go to sleep and forget about that, um, that *incident*?"

"Sure." I stroke my fingers along her throat.

She gasps but keeps her eyes closed.

"Sorry. Couldn't help myself."

“Okay, so the question?” She hurries the words out, her cheeks still burning.

I’m smiling so hard I fear my face might crack. “Answer honestly, precious.”

“I promise, okay? Ask.”

“Here goes.” I slide my hand down her shoulder, her arm, along the front of the blanket to her stomach and then pause. “If I slid my fingers into your panties right now, would I find your sweet little pussy drenched for me?”

Her eyes fly open. “You ass!” She turns violently and faces away from me, then fusses with her pillow while grumbling about what an ass I am.

I laugh. I can’t help it.

When she finally settles, I whisper, “You promised, precious. You promised to tell me the truth.”

She huffs.

My smile returns.

“I ... Well ... my panties *are* wet, but probably because I peed myself. Maybe you should’ve checked on whether or not I’m a notorious bed wetter before being all ‘*you’ll sleep with me.*’” She mimics a low male voice in an utterly darling fashion. “But you didn’t. So now your bed is covered in pee. Not, you know, not whatever it is you’re implying. Everything here is *pee*. You should’ve let me sleep in a guest bedroom instead of ruining your bed with tons of pee. But that’s on you. Goodnight.” Another huff, and she pulls the blanket over her head.

I lie back and stare at the ceiling, the grin still on my face as I drift off to sleep with dreams of the beautiful, bashful woman beside me.

LAURA

I stretch out, my whole body feeling relaxed. I can't remember the last time I slept this well. I didn't wake up with my usual aches and pains from the futon. I reach for a pillow and pull it into me. A wonderful smell fills my nose.

I'm not at home.

"Crap." I open one eye and look up at the white canopy. I pinch myself to make sure this isn't some crazy dream. The pain confirms all of this is real. I've been kidnapped, had my first kiss, and gained an exotic cat as a pet all in the span of a day. Not to mention I slept next to the sexiest man to walk this earth. How is this *not* a dream?

I yawn and sit up. My pillow wall didn't fare so well. Not that it matters now. Vincent isn't in the bed. I huff and fall back down on the comfy mattress. Why am I annoyed that he's not in this bed? I should be thankful after last night. I grab the blanket and groan, then pull it over my head once again.

My nipples start to tighten as I remember every move he made. The throb between my thighs comes right back with a vengeance. I take a few deep breaths trying to relax, but it doesn't help.

With every inhale, I only breathe his scent in more. He asked me if I was wet. I bite my bottom lip, remembering how his deep voice had sounded. How could he have possibly known that?

Wet doesn't even describe what I was last night. I'd been drenched. The silk panties had stuck to the lips of my sex. I'd

felt mortified that I was turned on to begin with. The moment that he moaned my name while touching himself, my body went into some crazy overdrive of horniness.

I don't think that was normal. I mean, I know you get wet, but that was something else altogether. I groan again just thinking about the way Xavier moaned my name. I can't stop thinking about it. My hand drifts down my stomach and pulls up the sleep dress. The throb between my legs is begging for relief.

"No!" I pop up from the bed. That's not happening. I glance at the bedroom door. It would be my luck that I'd get busted, and I would never hear the end of it. I stand on the side of the bed and get myself together. I should go explore some more while Xavier isn't here. Logic. Not lust.

I make my way into the beautiful bathroom. My eyes immediately flick toward the shower, which causes me to remember how Xavier looked last night stroking himself. I'd been mesmerized and turned on beyond belief watching him. But nothing had prepared me for how my own body would react. How each one of his muscles had tensed before he came.

I need to stop thinking about this. I don't care that it's the hottest thing that ever happened to me. Not that I would ever let him know that. Actually, after his question I think he already does know.

I force myself to tear my eyes away from the shower. Then I find myself roaming the house. Up and down the hallways I go. Opening door after door with no luck.

"Can I help you find something?"

I let out a small scream and turn around. Della is standing there smiling at me. I'm pretty sure she's trying not to laugh.

"I'm not looking for anyone," I rush to say.

"Mmm-hmm." Her eyebrows lift high.

"What? All I'm doing is looking around." I shrug, trying to play it off. I was *so* searching for Xavier. Why? That's one of many questions I keep asking myself. I mean, who seeks out their kidnapper?

“Okay, then.” She starts to turn to leave.

“Wait!”

Slowly, she turns back around to face me. This time she doesn't hide her smirk.

“Have you seen Xavier around?” I try to ask casually. I lift my hand and look at my nails.

“He had things to handle this morning. I'm sure he'll be back this afternoon.”

“Oh.” My stomach drops.

“Are you okay, Laura?”

“Yes, I'm fine, great really. I can have some peace finally.”

I turn and trudge back toward the master. Shit. Something dawns on me. I run up the stairs and back to the bedroom then shut the door behind me. Am I starting to get obsessive when it comes to him? I bite my thumb, a nervous habit I broke a long time ago. That's silly. I hate Xavier. There's no way I would obsess over him. I'm confused because I'm so turned on. That has to be it.

I'll take a bath since I have this place to myself. And that gorgeous tub to soak in. I'll give myself a nice little spa day. Not giving another thought about what Xavier is out doing or why he left me here all alone.

Why kidnap me if you didn't plan on spending any time with me? Seems as though it's a waste. I huff and stomp into the bathroom to turn on the tub. This is going to take a minute to fill up. I grab some things out of the drawers that caught my eye yesterday, setting them next to the tub.

“What? We don't care,” I tell myself in the mirror. I can see my hard nipples through the silky dress. My hair is still wild from sleep. Is this what someone looks like after a night of sex? I graze my thumb across my nipple. My breath hitches. This is why I'm acting like a crazy person. I'm so turned on I can't think rationally. Maybe if I give myself some relief, I'll be able to think straight.

I turn off the tub before walking out of the bathroom. I poke my head out the door and glance both ways. Coast is clear. I shut the door and run to the bed. I reach under the dress and pull my panties off before I climb up. I glance back to the door again and slip my hand down my body. I part my legs more.

When my fingers graze across my clit, I whimper. My whole body jerks. I suck in a breath, not prepared for that. It's never been this way before.

It's *him*. He's done this to me.

My clit throbs more. I'm growing as wet as I was yesterday. My eyes fall closed as I begin stroking myself. I think about Xavier in the shower. The sounds he'd made before he came with my name on his lips. I let out a small moan, my own orgasm fast approaching.

"Xavier." I breathe his name, my body starting to tighten. A hand wraps around my wrist. My eyes fly open to look up at Xavier.

He looks mad.

"*Oh holy shit.*" I swallow.

"Were you looking for me?"

XAVIER

*A*fter last night, I promised myself I'd leave her alone. I'd let her come to me. I'd sit back and let her realize I'm the only man for her.

But then I found her in my bed, her legs spread, her fingers on her clit, and a moan on her lips.

There will be no waiting. Not anymore.

I climb onto the bed and lower myself between her legs.

She tries to scoot back, but I grip her hips and keep her in place.

“Xavier, I was just—”

“I know what you were doing, precious.” I stare at her wet cunt, her pink hole, the swollen lips. She's desperate to come. “But I can do it for you.” I press my mouth to her sweet flesh and lick.

She keens and arches, her nipples pressing through the fabric of her night dress.

I want to see them, to see all of her. With a yank, I shove her dress up and get a look at her pink nipples. Reaching up, I palm her tits and squeeze as I suck the juices from her pussy.

She writhes as I pinch her nipples and twist them between my thumb and forefinger. “Xavier!” She gasps when I swipe my tongue lower and press inside her.

My cock aches at the tightness I find, the heat. She's so wet and wanting, I could slide right into her, fill her cunt with

every inch.

“So fucking good.” I groan against her pussy and pull my hands back, then slide them under her ass. Lifting, I feast on her, licking and sucking, squeezing her round ass as I dine and sample.

She runs her fingers through my hair and tangles them there, yanking on the strands as I eat her cunt like the perfect peach it is.

“I need to feel you, precious.” I move one hand forward and ease a finger inside her.

“Oh my God,” she moans.

“So tight for me.” I flick her clit with my tongue. “Have you saved this pretty little cunt all for me?”

She looks down, her eyes locking with mine. “Please, don’t stop.”

“Tell me, precious one, is this all mine?” I add another finger, stretching her as I continue lavng her clit.

Her thighs start to shake. “Yes,” she breathes.

“My sweet cherry.” I open my mouth wider and press it to her, using the broadside of my tongue to stroke her relentlessly.

Her hips work against me, getting more friction as I pulse my fingers inside her. She’s imagining it’s my cock, and so am I. My own hips are thrusting against the bed, keeping pace with the way her body is moving under my touch.

When I curl my fingers and stroke her clit even faster, her back arches and her hips seize. Then the hottest sound I’ve ever heard echoes around the room, her moan bouncing back at me with my name in a breathy chant. She unwinds, her coil springing free as she comes. I can feel her cunt squeezing my fingers, and my cock kicks at the thought of it. But I focus on her, every last bit of her pleasure. I swallow it down, licking and sucking until she finally relaxes into the bed and takes a deep, shuddering breath.

I kiss her softly several times, silently thanking her for giving me such a lovely morning gift.

When I stand, her eyes stray to my pants.

“Do you want it, precious?” I ask and run the heel of my palm along my cock.

She licks her lips. “I, um ...” But then she pulls her dress down, hiding her tits and the perfect pink between her thighs. “I should get dressed.”

I crawl on top of her, and she scoots back until the top of her head is pressed against the headboard. “I won’t take anything you don’t offer, precious. But if I ever find you pleasuring yourself like that again, I’ll spank you before I let you come. This is *my* house, and your pleasure is mine to give. Do you understand?” Even now I feel the wet warmth of her cunt soaking through my pants. Fuck, I want her so badly I can’t think straight.

She nods, and her gaze darts to my lips.

“You taste so sweet, precious.” I lean closer. “Have you ever sampled yourself?”

She shakes her head, her hands clutching my shoulders.

“You should.” I press my lips to hers, softly despite the raging need I feel like fire in my veins. Then I stroke my tongue along her lips until she opens for me. Sharing her taste, I delve inside her mouth and reach down to cup one of her tits.

I knead it as I suck her tongue, then pinch her nipple, making her gasp. If I stay on top of her, I won’t be able to stop myself. So, though it hurts me like a knee to the gut, I pull back and stand.

“Meet me in the kitchen. I’ll make you breakfast.”

Her eyes are dazed, her legs still slightly apart, and her hard nipples begging for my mouth.

“Get dressed or I’ll have to bend you over the bed, precious.” My tone turns gruff, even though I don’t intend it that way. Then again, I *did* just threaten her.

Get your shit together, Xavier. “I didn’t mean ... never mind.” I run a hand through my hair. “I’ll see you in the kitchen.” With that, I turn and hurry from the room, but not before I

catch the mischievous glint in her eye and the smirk on her lips.

LAURA

“So? What do you think?” I ask Sue.

She lets out a yawn and lays her head back down.

“That was a little bit rude.”

She continues to lie there, not looking one bit sorry. I glance down at the little black dress I put on. I’ve paired it with heels that are so beautiful they almost brought tears to my eyes.

Xavier made sure I had a variety to choose from, which made it almost impossible for me to settle on a pair. Yet, every time I’d walk into the closet, these particular ones would catch my eye. How many times had I stared longingly at them through the window of the boutique store of the casino? Now that I think about it, there are a few things in this closet that look familiar. Things that I might have wanted but never dreamed I’d have. Could Xavier have known I wanted them? I shake that crazy thought from my head and continue staring at my pretties.

They are works of art covered in jewels with red bottoms. I never thought I’d have the luxury of wearing a pair. I never allowed myself to try them on. I knew I’d fall in love as soon as I slipped them on my feet, only to be disappointed when I couldn’t have them. And I was right. I’ve fallen in love. They are so fancy it makes me wonder what the heck they’re even doing here. It’s not as though we’re going out for a night on the town. Why would I need all these fancy things?

Still, I found myself putting them on with the little black dress. I’ve never owned one of those either. I’ve heard other girls

talk about the little black dress you're supposed to keep in your closet. I walk over to the mirror. The black is slimming, but more importantly, it goes with anything.

Here I am, all done up with no place to go. I don't think I've ever looked this good in my life. Between getting as much sleep as I wanted and having the finest beauty products filling my bathroom drawers, my skin and I have never been this healthy. I'm glowing from head to toe. I mean, it could also have something to do with the earth-shattering orgasm Xavier gave me days ago, but I'm not willing to admit that out loud yet.

"I'm not taking it off," I tell Sue just so we're clear.

She opens one eye to look at me but closes it again to return to her nap. I guess I'm just going to look killer for dinner. Xavier will do his normal and ignore me. As if I care. "I don't care. You don't always have to take his side." Sue blinks sleepily.

So what if she doesn't understand me? If I didn't talk to the cat, I wouldn't have anyone to talk to here.

I'm full of crap. I *do* care. I care way too much, in fact. Because of that, I've been trying to stay away from him too, because I know what's happening. Morning, noon, and night I'm thinking of Xavier and how he was that day in bed. When he put his mouth between my thighs. I whimper and press my legs together. Since then, he's stayed away from me. He doesn't even complain about my pillow wall anymore.

It makes my head hurt trying to understand him. Hell, he makes my vagina hurt, too. Now that she's had a small taste of him, she wants more, and he's suddenly playing hard to get. Not that I want him or anything. Because that would be ridiculous. I mean, he kidnapped me, for heaven's sake!

I should go take a peek at what he's doing right now. One should always know where the enemy is. Not because I miss him or anything. I don't. It's not even him that I think I'm starting to get a little obsessed with him. It's the orgasm. Which is his fault. A week ago, I thought an orgasm was this flare of pleasure that quickly faded. That was not at all what he did to my body. Not even close.

I walk out of the bedroom, impressed with my ability to walk in these heels. Star always made it look easy. I sway my hips like she would and wonder if that somehow helps. It does make me feel sexy. It was always so interesting to watch men practically fall at her feet. I never understood it. Then I think what would it be like if Xavier fell at my feet?

Powerful.

That will never happen. He doesn't have to fall to his knees for anyone. No, everyone else falls to them for him. The rest of us just have to do whatever he commands. Then when he gets bored with you, he'll be on to the next thing like you're not even in the room. Not that I care that he doesn't seem to notice me anymore; it's more not understanding why I have to remain here if he's through.

When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I pause when I see two other men in suits. I take a step off the stairs, the click of my heels drawing their attention. Both their eyes travel down my body and back up.

"Hello, gentleman. Don't mind me. I'm just being all kidnapped and held against my will." I wave my hand dismissively. The taller one lifts his brows, looking like he is trying not to laugh. The other has his eyes on my legs, and he licks his lips. I really can't blame him. For once, I too, think my legs look killer. I'm never going to question why women wear heels again. "Unless."

I take a few steps closer to the men. The tall one steps back like he's scared of me. Interesting. The other has moved on to my boobs. Again, can't blame him. Today I've learned the power of a pushup bra.

"You've come to save me?"

"I'd actually like it if you didn't talk to us," the tall one mutters under his breath. The other moves closer, caught in the little-black-dress spell.

"Its women like you that crumble empires." He reaches out to grab a lock of my hair, then freezes when a loud growl comes

from behind me. I turn my head to see Sue standing ten feet away, her fangs on full display.

“Shit!” The man lunges for me and wraps his arm around my waist, then yanks me forward and pushes me behind him.

I stumble in my heels and fall straight into the taller man right before all hell breaks loose.

XAVIER

Cain is touching my Laura, pulling her against him as Sue hisses and hunches down, preparing to pounce.

“Stop!” I bellow and take Laura into my arms.

Sue hisses again, her ears back as she looks not at Cain, but at Henley.

“It was all an accident,” Laura protests.

I look down at her, at the way her lips are in a pout, then lower at the swells of her breasts as they peek over the neckline of the black dress she’s wearing. And then I move even farther down to the miles of smooth legs that end in the sexiest fucking heels I’ve ever seen in my life.

“What are you wearing?” I growl.

She shrugs one innocent shoulder. “It was in my closet.”

“I’ll deal with you two later.” I jerk my chin toward the door. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Boss.” Cain gives me a curt nod, and Henley hurries past Sue, who swipes at him. Her claws narrowly miss—which is intentional on her part—but he picks up the pace.

“It’s okay.” Laura turns to coo at the cat. “We were just talking. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Sue’s ears perk back up and she walks over and rubs against Laura’s proffered hand. Her purr tells me she’s settled down. That makes one of us.

With as much control as I can manage, I grab Laura's arm and march her into my office. Slamming the door, I pull her to my desk.

"Hey!" She tries to yank her arm free, but I don't let her. "What's going on?"

I grip her hips and set her on my desk, then stare down at her beautiful face. "Tell me what happened."

"Nothing." She glances down.

"You aren't a convincing liar, my precious one." I tilt her chin up. "Tell me."

She licks her lips. "Well, I was just coming down to see what you were doing, and I saw those guys. I talked to one of them." Her eyes dart away.

My heart kicks up a notch, veiled rage pulsing through me.

"What did you talk about?"

She closes her eyes. "Nothing important."

"Two lies." I lean closer to her. "I don't tolerate lying, Laura. Not from you. Don't do it again."

Her brows draw together. "You can't tell me what to do."

"I can, and I will. Now tell me what really happened."

She huffs. "No." And then she tries to hop down from my desk.

With a sigh, I step back and let her.

She starts to march away from me in those goddamn sexy-as-fuck heels, but I grab her elbow and whip her back around, then bend her over my desk.

"Xavier!" She flails a little and knocks off some papers, but I ignore it and yank up her dress.

"Fuck." Her panties are black nothings, and they rip easily in my hand.

"What are you—"

My hand comes down on her fair skin with a crack.

She yowls, and I spank her again and again, one hand holding her to the desk, the other one reddening her perfect ass.

“Xavier!” She struggles again, so I aim lower, my hand slapping against the back of her pussy.

She jolts, and I slap her there again. My hand comes away wet, and I lick her taste from me before adding a few more blows to her pink skin.

“Don’t lie to me, precious.” I slide my fingers down her ass to the wet paradise between her legs. Pushing through her folds, I slide two fingers inside her. “I know you like being spanked.” I lean closer, bending over her back, and whisper in her ear. “I can taste just how much you enjoyed it.”

“Xavier,” she gasps as I pull my fingers out and circle her clit. “Don’t stop.”

I should punish her and leave her wanting, but when she says my name like that, I’m weak. She *makes* me weak. How many times over the past few days have I almost given in and yanked down her ridiculous pillow wall to bury my face between her legs? To give her the thorough fucking she so clearly needs? But I won’t hurt her. Not like that. I can’t. She means too much to me. She’s precious beyond anything I’ve ever known.

“*And you just spanked her,*” my mind chides as I keep stroking Laura’s clit.

She moans and spreads her legs wider for me, giving me a perfect view of her soaked cunt.

I break. No man could withstand this, not even me. With a groan, I sink to my knees, spread her legs wider, then run my tongue from her clit to her ass.

Her moan shakes me to my soul, and I lick her again and again, my tongue delving and tasting all of her.

Gripping her ankles, I spread her even wider, opening up her world to my mouth as I lick and suck her pussy and her tight little asshole.

“Has anyone ever had you here?” I run my finger along the wet hole and caress her there while I use my other hand to lightly slap her cunt.

“I—” She gasps, her thighs shaking with each impact from my palm. “No.”

“Good.” I tongue her ass some more, enjoying the way she shakes for me. “It’s mine, precious one. All of you.”

I press my face against her ass and dart my tongue to her clit.

She moans again and reaches a hand behind her. When she tangles her fingers in my hair, it spurs me onward. I want her to come, to cream all over my tongue as I swallow her down. So I lick her recklessly, my tongue slipping along her clit as I circle her asshole with my finger.

With a little pressure, I push my finger inside. She stiffens, then eases back down. Her hips work against my tongue as I eat her from behind, and when I increase the pressure from my finger, she seizes, her body locking as a low, deep moan pulls from her and her pussy clenches with each rolling wave of release. Her asshole squeezes my finger in rhythmic waves as I lick and suck and make a meal of every bit of her.

When she’s spent, her knees weak and her breathing heavy, I pull back and yank her dress back into place.

“Xavier.” It’s the only word she’s moaned for the past few minutes. I love it every time it passes her lips.

“Yes, precious one?”

She turns and looks up at me, her eyes wide. “You put your finger in my ass.”

I step to her, hungry for more but holding back. “I intend to put a lot more there.” I take her hand and guide it to my cock.

She strokes down my hard length, and when her tongue darts out to wet her lips, I have to stifle a groan.

But I’ve already gone too far. I ignored every warning my brain tried to throw up, and I bent her over my desk. I’ve stayed away from her ever since I threatened her that night, ever since I couldn’t manage to leash the beast that craves

every bit of her. But the moment I saw her in the arms of another man, something inside me just snapped. Fuck, what have I done?

I take a step back. "I'm ... sorry."

Her eyebrows rise in confusion just as Sue hisses outside my door and then someone yells out in pain.

LAURA

All my attention is so focused on Xavier. It's as if nothing else in the world exists. He's all I can see. Nothing else matters. *Obsessed.*

A curse leaves his mouth as he turns away from me. I reach out for him to pull him back. I want more of him. Yet, it seems as though something had changed. Is he planning on leaving? Does he consider this a game?

If so, it's clearly one I don't understand. My fingers graze his arm, causing him to stop instantly and turn that dark gaze of his back on me. I jerk my hand back like he's burned me. I'm hurt that once again he's storming away from me after we shared an intimate moment. It leaves me cold. Worst of all, it makes me feel lonely. Then again, it's a feeling I'm used to.

"Don't move," he orders me. Again, he turns away from me. He's the most frustrating man in the world. He strides to the door. I fist my hands at my sides, willing myself to not be hurt by his reaction. This is what I wanted, no? It wasn't him that I enjoyed; it was his touch. I don't want him; I want the pleasure.

Right. That's it. I just wasn't done getting what I needed from him is all. He said to come to him when I wanted pleasure and, well, sometimes a girl needs more than one orgasm. That might be why he's single. At least he better be single. Oh. my. God. What if he isn't single at all? I haven't even considered that he may have someone else.

I'm about to pick up the glass globe off his desk to lob it at him when I hear Sue and the commotion outside a moment before Xavier throws the door open. I caught a small glance of the same man from earlier that had looked me up and down. It's hard to see anything when Xavier's frame fills up so much of the space. I can tell from Sue's growls she's about to pounce on someone or something.

Xavier turns back to look at me. "Not an inch!" His voice booms through his office. I take a step back due to the intensity in his voice before he slams the door so hard the room shakes. I'm shocked it doesn't shatter. I don't know what the heck is going on, but between the murderous tone Xavier had and Sue sounding all feral out there, I decide that staying in this office is my best bet.

Then everything is silent. I take a few steps closer to the door, trying to hear anything at all. I step out of the heels and leave them behind. Somehow, I end up at the door. Then my hand is on the knob.

I'll only take a small peek. Someone could need help. I look at the globe in my other hand, not exactly sure what it can do to protect me, but it's better than nothing. When I crack the door open and look out, I don't see anything. I yank it the rest of the way open and pop my head out, but still no one is there. The only thing that catches my eye is the splattering of blood across the white marble floor. Slowly, I shut the door and hope Xavier is okay.

Wait. Why would I care if he's okay? He kidnapped me. Held me hostage while giving me orgasms and then quickly dismissing me with his head games. I'm going to be stuck here forever, always tormented by Xavier running hot and cold.

It's not like Scott is going to come to my rescue. He might want to, but what's he going to do? There's no way in or out of this place unless Xavier allows it. I press my hand to my forehead just thinking about Scott. He's a mess. Terrible with money. In fact, I'm worried that he might be getting himself into *more* trouble trying to come up with the money to get me out of here. Trouble that will have him killed either way.

I glance back at Xavier's desk, suddenly remembering I'm alone in his office. I dash back to it. I start pulling open drawers to see what I can find. The office is the only room that's ever locked. Oh, and that creepy door that goes to the basement that I really don't want to investigate any further.

My heart drops when I see two cell phones. Only cheaters and drug dealers have two phones. Right? I think that's what they say. I grab one and it doesn't power on. The next lights right up. It looks like one of those cheap burner phones. I punch in my brother's number. It rings and rings. I close my eyes, willing him to answer. Hoping that nothing bad has happened to him.

"Who is this?" I drop into Xavier's chair when I hear Scott's voice. A wave of relief washes over me. I had no idea how worried I'd been about him until I heard his voice. I think I've been trying to block it out.

"Scott." I say his name.

"Laura. Are you okay?" he rushes to say.

"I'm fine. I swear."

"Has he fucking touched you? I was already going to kill him but—"

"Stop. Please. Calm down. I need to tell you this. I don't have much time." I hear him suck in a deep breath. "I swear to you. He's been good to me. This place is better than anywhere I've ever been. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, so I'll kill him fast."

I roll my eyes. "This is not the time to be tough. At least not with someone like Xavier. I don't want you to do anything stupid to get me out of here. If you get yourself killed, we're both screwed."

"Laura." He sounds defeated.

"Be smart, and I love you. I have to go."

"I love you, too," he says before I end the call.

I shut all of the drawers before shoving the phone between my tits. What's the worst that can happen if I get caught? If I've learned anything in the week I've been here, it's that Xavier isn't going to hurt me. I don't even care if he takes the phone at this point. I've made my call. If he doesn't know I have it, then maybe I can call again later.

I slip back into my heels and return to his seat. I barely get my ass on the leather before the door swings open.

I stand, trying to look bored. "Am I free to go or did you want to bark more orders at me? Spank me again?" I lick my bottom lip as I walk toward him. "If I recall correctly, you were done with me."

He steps back when I finally get to him, like he doesn't want me to touch him. That one little movement by him cuts me deep, and with everything I have in me, I try not to let him see that. "I'm rescinding my invite to you for the *Harry Potter*-athon." I hold my chin high as I stroll past him. Take that, Mr. Hot and Cold. That pillow wall is about to get a lot higher and thicker.

Not that he even remembered to get the movies. He has a habit of forgetting things. Mostly me.

XAVIER

“*L*aura.” I want to reach for her, but I keep my hands to myself. I’ve already gone too far.

“Leave me alone.” She hurries down the hall, her heels clicking as she rushes toward the stairs.

I *can't* leave her alone. That's the problem. I think about her constantly, want her endlessly, need her desperately. But I'm a bad man, one who's used to taking what he wants instead of waiting for it to come to him. I didn't want to be that way with Laura, but then I threatened her, and then ... Then I bent her over my desk and reddened her ass before eating her hot cunt from the back.

“Stop following me.” She stomps up the stairs. “I already said no Harry Potter for you.”

“I just want to explain.”

“Explain what?” She whirls on the top step, loses her balance, and starts to topple.

I catch her in my arms as she squeals in alarm.

She forces her frown back into place. “I just don't wear heels a lot.” She kicks her feet.

I don't put her down. Instead, I jump the last step and carry her toward our room.

“I can walk.”

“I know.” I ease her into our room and onto her side of the bed. Then I lean over and rest my fists on the mattress on

either side of her, meeting her eye to eye.

“I want to apologize.”

“About time!” She crosses her arms, pushing the tops of her breasts up. I want to bite them.

“I’m sorry I spanked you and for what happened after.”

Her face falls, the triumph draining away. “That’s what you’re sorry for?”

“Yes.” I sigh. “I’m a bastard. I’m trying to be better, but I guess that’s just not something I’m capable of.” I should offer to let her sleep in another room, or maybe even to let her go. But I can’t. After all, despite my apology, I’m still a bastard. I want her for myself.

She swallows hard, and her face goes somewhat blank, as if she’s trying to hide whatever emotions are bubbling beneath the surface. “What was that noise? Is Sue okay?”

“She’s fine.” I could tell Laura I killed Henley and that his body is cooling in my basement, but I figure that might be a little too much for her to handle right now. “She sensed a threat and acted.”

“She’s like you.”

I shrug. “We both take care of what’s ours. Everything’s fine. I just have some things to deal with. But I promise once they’re handled, I’ll be here, and I won’t overstep my bounds again.”

“Will you avoid me more, then?” She pouts. Fuck, she has no clue how irresistible she is.

“I’m not avoiding you.”

Her eyes narrow.

“Look, I just don’t want to take more than is offered. And most of all, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me.” She stares into my eyes. “I’m okay.”

I can feel the phantom sting on my palm, see the way her ass turned pink and then red with each slap. I want more, I want to

plunge inside her and fuck her raw. But once again, I try to rein myself in.

“Listen, if you could please give me another chance, I will finish my work today, and once I’m done, I’ll happily sit and watch Henry Potter for as long as you like.”

Her eyes brighten, the simple look of excitement warming me all over. But then she leans away from me and perches back on her elbows, a suggestive pose if I’ve ever seen one. Is she trying to drive me mad with lust?

Despite a stiff protest from my cock, I stand and await my sentence.

She wobbles her head back and forth like she’s considering two different, very difficult, choices.

I force my hands to stay at my sides, even when she glances at my erection and licks her lips.

“I’m going to give you another chance, but not because *you* deserve one. And I know Star would say I’m being a pushover and that I’m weak, but that’s not true. I’m giving you another shot because I’m nice. I’ve always been that way, and I can’t seem to change even when some guy kidnaps me and holds me prisoner. I don’t know any other way to be.”

“I agree.” She is nice, kind—everything I’m not. I think it’s why I was drawn to her in the first place.

“Thank you.” How many times have I said those two words and meant it? Not many. But for her, everything I say or think or do is 100 percent genuine.

She holds up a finger. “I will allow you to *Harry*—not Henry—Potter with me *if* you provide me with unlimited movie theater buttered popcorn, candy, and Dr. Pepper.”

“Done.”

“That was easy.” She sits up. “Maybe I should’ve asked for more.”

I lean down and brush my lips across hers in a soft, chaste kiss. “You should always ask for more, precious. You’re worth it.”

Her cheeks flame a lovely pink, and I have to back away before I make yet another mistake.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. The movie room is already prepared.”

“There’s a movie room?” She kicks off her heels.

“Yes, at the top of the stairs along the back of the house that abuts the ridge.”

Recognition lights in her eyes. “I thought that was just a weird lounge area with lots of recliners.”

“Well, yes, but there’s a screen that drops down and a projector at the back.”

“You already have the movies?” She steps toward me.

“Of course. I got them the day you first mentioned them.”

“Really?” She moves to stand right in front of me.

I look down at her, wishing I could tell her everything she makes me feel. But if I try it, will I wind up between her thighs when I *know* I should wait? “Precious, if you haven’t noticed, your wish is my command. Anything you want, I’ll get it for you. As long as you don’t ask—”

“To leave.” She finishes for me, then jumps up on her tiptoes and drops a warm kiss on my cheek. “Okay, we have a deal. Movie night is a go.” She drops back to her feet and twirls. “I can’t wait! You’re going to love it. And I’ll try not to talk too much, but sometimes I get excited and I can’t seem to just, you know, put a zipper on it, but that doesn’t mean—”

I swoop her into my arms and kiss her again. Already breaking my rules, already giving in to the caveman that lives in my deepest heart. But she’s too much to bear, her bubbly happiness going to my brain and intoxicating every bit of me.

I kiss her until she’s breathless, then I put her back on her feet. “It’s a date.” I back out of the room as she stares after me, her eyes glazed, her fingers going to her lips.

Taking the stairs quickly, I pull out my phone and call Cain. After all, he’s the one who should clean up the Henley mess.

The asshole was his recruit, not mine. But when he tried to move on Laura, he signed his death warrant. And when he came back to my house to try and take me out? I became judge, jury, and executioner all at once. Cain will understand, but that doesn't mean there won't be consequences. After all, Henley's uncle is in the Brotherhood if the rumors are to be believed.

Even so, if he comes for me, he won't be the first assassin I've had on my tail. I'll take the hits as they come. But tonight, I intend to relax with Laura, learn more about her, and keep my goddamn hands to myself for once.

LAURA

“**S**tockholm syndrome,” I repeat the words as my finger runs down the page in the dictionary until I find it.

Feelings of trust or affection felt in many cases of kidnapping or hostage-taking by a victim toward a captor.

Yep. That’s what I’ve got. I shut the book and put it back on the shelf in the small library. This isn’t my fault. It was bound to happen that I would fall for him. Has that been his plan the whole time? To get me here and then make me fall in love with him? What else could it be? Furthermore... Why me? That’s the one thing I really keep getting stuck on.

I tap my finger on my lips when it hits me. He’s succeeded. I may not want to admit it, but his plan worked. He knew exactly what he was doing with those orgasms. Luring me in with pleasure until I fell for him completely. Before this, I’d been able to resist him.

Barely, but I had. How many times had he asked me out? I’d lost count. Again and again I’d turned him down. Now here I am, excited for my date tonight. A date that will be my first ever. The one thing I’ve always tried to avoid, and he practically had me begging for one today.

That sneaky bastard. I roam out of the library and toward the bedroom to change into something more comfortable. Even with his trickery, I’m not inclined to cancel our date. What he did was underhanded and also a tad bit sweet, if I’m being honest. The thought that someone would go to such lengths to get a date with me is crazy. But also kind of hot in a way.

Okay, now I'm really sure I have this whole Stockholm syndrome thing. Why am I fighting this? I keep asking myself that question. The only thing that Xavier has done to upset me is avoid me. If it wasn't for him and his attraction to me, where might my brother or even I be right now?

A chill runs down my spine thinking about it. He paid off my brother's debt and is holding me as collateral. Okay, yes, I might not be able to leave, but I want for nothing besides his attention. Is that really so horrible? I mean, this place is freaking wonderful. I haven't been this relaxed and well fed in my whole life. He even tries not to push me when I can tell he wants so much more. He could have long ago taken what he wanted, but he hasn't. And I know he more than wants it.

I see it in his eyes. I've figured him out. He's holding back for me. That's the real reason he's staying away. I think this last week has been as hard for him as it has been for me. When I enter the bedroom, Sue sits up from where she was lying but remains on my side of the bed.

"Where have you been?"

She jumps down and rubs herself against my legs.

I scratch behind her ears. "You think Xavier is a good man, too, don't you?" She purrs louder. "Come on. We need pjs for this movie date." She follows me into the massive closet. I head over to the drawers that contain all different types of pjs. I mean, who needs this many to choose from?

"What about this one?" I hold up a lace nightie to show Sue. My face warms when I think about Xavier picking this out for me. "Too fancy. I agree." I don't want to look like I'm trying too hard. I have to play it cool.

Next, I pick up a cami and short set. "This is cute." I don't get a big reaction from Sue, but her ears perk up a bit, so I'm taking that as a good sign. I decide to just wear the shorts from the set. I grab one of Xavier's shirts from his side of the closet and pull it over my head. The smell of him makes my nipples go hard.

What has this man done to my body? I only have to smell him, and I'm already getting turned on. Would it really hurt to have some fun with Xavier? Yes. Because all good things must come to an end. That's the moral to my life story. Nothing lasts.

Xavier will get what he wants, and then what? What if I was the one who didn't want it to end? Then what would I do?

"I guess it would be my turn to kidnap Xavier." I snort, telling the joke to Sue.

She blinks as if she knows it's not really a joke or something.

"It's a joke."

"What's a joke?" Xavier strolls into the closet.

"Nothing," I say quickly. "You're late. A few hours implies three hours. It's now been three hours and nine minutes."

As always, he looks handsome. His suit is a little worn from the day. I don't miss the spot of blood on his collar. I fight back a small laugh. I guess being with a man like Xavier, it's not other women's lipstick you'll be finding on his clothes but blood.

"Did you miss me?"

I open my mouth to say yes, but close it quickly before I give away the farm.

He smirks. "My apologies. I wanted to get you something." He holds up the brown bag in his hand.

"What is it?" I step closer to him, immediately forgiving him for being late. I mean what's a few minutes when he came bearing a gift?

"Open it." I take the bag from him and pull the handles apart to look inside.

"How did you know?" I pull out the Harry Potter Hufflepuff slippers.

"I did my homework and read up on it. As soon as I read the description, I knew you had to be this puff thing."

I drop the bag and throw myself at him. He catches me, and I pepper kisses all over his face. When I pull back, his face is blank. I swallow realizing what I'd done. I wet my bottom lip. His hold on me tightens as the look in his eyes changes.

He's never going to let me go. And if he keeps looking at me the way he currently is, I'm not sure if he'll ever be able to get me to leave.



“Did you get yourself any Slytherin slippers?” I settle into the recliner beside Xavier as he fiddles with an enormous remote that seems to control the windows, seats, and the projector.

“Slytherin?” he asks as the lights go dark and the WB symbol flashes on screen with my favorite theme music.

“Oh, you're definitely a Slytherin.” I drop some popcorn in my mouth and chomp as he hits another button. My seat starts to massage me. I moan and crunch, utterly contented as I slip Sue a few kernels. She's reclining beside me, her eyes on the big screen.

“Those are the snake ones?” He opens a box of milk duds. “I saw their description and knew that was your opposite.”

“Deffo.” I grin, loving the theater, the sugary and buttery feast, and the company.

“So that's me then?”

“Mm-hmm.” I slurp down some Dr. Pepper as Harry gets delivered to Privet Drive.

“So the kid's an orphan.” He eats a few Milk Duds.

“You don't know the story at all?” I can't believe he hasn't at least heard of the series.

“No.” He shrugs. “I suppose I've been focused on other things.” His gaze slides to me.

I reach over and sacrifice my Dr. Pepper hand to hold his. “Well I'm glad you're getting your priorities straightened out

now.”

He snorts a laugh and laces our fingers together. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

I nod, then settle back in my seat. We watch in silence for a while.

“That’s the villain.” He points at the screen when a certain professor is introduced.

“What? How did you know that?”

“Takes one to know one, I guess.”

“Wait...” I sputter a little. “But what about Snape? He’s the obvious—”

“Exactly.” He rubs his thumb along the back of my hand. “Far too obvious.”

I harrumph a little and look over at Sue, but she’s snoozing quietly. I steal a glance at Xavier. Definitely a Slytherin. When he turns his head and catches me looking, I quickly glance back at the screen. He squeezes my fingers.

We watch the rest of the movie, and then the second one. When the credits roll, he stands and stretches. “I guess we’re done?”

“Not by half.” I peer at my now-empty popcorn bucket. “But we need supplies.”

I stand and stretch, too.

Xavier’s eyes travel down my body. When my nipples harden, I put my arms down and try to play it off.

It doesn’t work, because before I can say anything flippant, Xavier’s arms are around me, his mouth claiming mine.

XAVIER

Why is she so utterly irresistible? Wearing my shirt, being so excited about watching movies with me, and stirring every bit of passion that still lives inside me—I can't stop myself from touching her, from wanting her.

She kisses me back, her arms twining around my neck. Soft, warm, smelling a little of her and a little of me. She's perfect.

Reaching down, I grip her ass and lift her. She straddles me, her legs locking around my waist as I deepen the kiss, taking too much, but also not enough.

Sitting next to her without touching more than her hand has been maddening. But she's worth the wait. Her tongue caresses mine, her breasts pressed tightly against my chest. I want to throw her down right here in the aisle and fuck her, make her moan my name as I come deep inside her.

Pulling back, I shake my head a little. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just don't stop." She leans forward and kisses me, urging me onward.

That's what I needed, what I've been waiting for, and I don't take it for granted. I carry her from the movie room and down the stairs, kissing her all the while. Her words ricochet through my mind—*don't stop. Just don't stop.*

I won't. I reach our bedroom and lay her down. Her mouth is intoxicating, and I keep kissing her until I have to come up for air. But I don't waste that time, not when she's hot and needy.

So I stand and pull her to a sitting position, then strip my shirt off her.

Her tits are a siren song, and I drop to my knees and bury my face between them, then suck one tight bud into my mouth. She moans, her fingers racing through my hair as I suck and lick. Moving one hand down her stomach, I hook my fingers into her shorts and panties, then feel how wet she already is for me. My cock goes to war with my zipper, and I don't know how I'm going to last any amount of time inside her.

I kiss the valley between her tits, then slowly pull her panties and shorts away. Her pussy glistens, the folds pink and promising.

I don't wait; I dive low and push her back. She hits the mattress with a sultry sigh as I spread her legs and lick all along her sweet cunt. I could eat her for hours, could stay right here and pleasure her until she begged me to stop. So I do; I lick and taste, use my tongue to fuck her, and then tease her clit.

Before long, her thighs are shaking, her body on the edge.

When I pull back, she groans. And when I strip out of my clothes, her eyes go to my cock.

"Xavier," she breathes as I climb on top of her and nestle between her warm thighs.

"Are you ready?" My back muscles quiver with the need to get to work, to make this woman mine. But I wait. For once in my life, I want permission instead of forgiveness.

"Don't stop." She leans up and kisses me.

That's all I need. With a quick thrust, I enter her hot cunt.

She yelps, but I kiss away the sting and remain still, letting her adjust.

Then she uses her heels to dig into the backs of my thighs. "Please," she whispers against my lips. "Please."

I pull back and slide home again, groaning at the perfection she's giving me. "You feel so good, Laura. So fucking

perfect.” I start a slow rhythm despite my need to fuck her wild and rough. I won’t hurt her. Never.

“More.” She arches, her tits begging for my mouth.

I bend down to them, sucking and nibbling as I move inside her, her pussy squeezing me until I’m nothing but deep, damning need. Until I realize I’d make a deal with any devil in heaven or on earth if it meant I got to come inside Laura, to coat her with my seed, to worship her body by giving her everything I have.

My hips move faster, pistoning into her as I grunt and groan, not giving a damn about the wet sounds or the slap of skin on skin. It’s a symphony of sex, one that I want to hear over and over as she moans beneath me.

Licking my thumb, I press it to her clit.

She jolts, her eyes flying open as I stare down at her.

“Watch me when you come, precious Laura. I want to see it.” I stroke her fast, back and forth, my thumb matching the pace of my hips.

My balls draw up tight, my shaft thickening with seed, but I won’t let go, not until I see it in her eyes.

Her hips lock, her mouth opening, and then she lets out the sexiest moan, her body clenching me tightly as I stare deeply into her lust-hazed eyes. It’s my name on her lips. *Mine*. And it always will be.

I give her two more hard thrusts, then release, my cock sending an explosion of pleasure through my body as I keep my gaze locked with hers. My pleasure lives here with Laura, and she needs to know I treasure every second she gives me. I spend every bit of seed into her, marking her as mine, staking my claim.

And when we’re done, and we both lie in a panting heap of sweat, I throw my arms around her and pull her to my chest.

“This doesn’t mean you get out of watching the rest of the movies,” she chides breathlessly.

I laugh, hard and deep, then kiss her again until she forgets all about the movies.

LAURA

I feel Xavier slowly try to slip from bed. I scoot over on top of him more and wrap myself around him. His body shakes with laughter.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I kiss his neck and cuddle closer to him. I love the smell of him. I don’t think I’ve ever been so relaxed in my life. When I’m next to Xavier, I feel like I’m invincible. I’m not sure if I’ve ever truly felt this safe before.

“I have a few things to handle. I thought maybe I could get them done before you woke up. You’ve only slept a few hours.”

I yawn. That was his fault. Him and that mouth of his. I lost count of how many times we made love. After the first time he carried me into the tub. He said I needed to rest, but I just climbed into his lap again. It didn’t take much to get him to crack and take me again. I love that I can do that to him. Right now, I have no intention of getting up. Xavier runs his hand up and down my back.

“I like cuddling you.”

His hand stops moving for a moment.

I bite the inside of my cheek. I’m being too much. I knew this would happen. That I would get needy for him. Now I’m addicted to him and don’t want to let him ever leave the room. “Sorry. I know you have stuff to do.” I try and slip off him but don’t get anywhere. He rolls, pinning me under him.

I wrap my legs around him. His hard cock rests against my sex. “You’re wet.” He smirks. “I can’t leave you like that.”

I shake my head. “You can’t.” I lift my hips, trying to rub against him.

He keeps making me this way, so he needs to take care of it each and every time.

“Xavier.” I moan his name. He closes his eyes like he’s savoring the sounds I’m making.

“You have no idea what you’ve done to me.” Before I can ask him what he means, his mouth is on mine and he’s thrusting deep inside of me. I forget about everything else as he makes love to me. After the second orgasm, sleep takes me.

When I wake back up, the sun is shining in the windows and Xavier is gone. I pick up the note he left on his pillow.

I’ll be back soon. Miss you already.

Yours, Xavier

I flop back down on the bed and hold the note to my chest. My Xavier. It’s crazy to think of him belonging to only me. It doesn’t help those possessive thoughts I’ve been having.

I bet no one knows this side of Xavier. The one where he leaves cute letters and watches Harry Potter. It makes me feel special. That he only gives me this part of himself. That’s something I’ve never felt before. I roll out of bed to go in search of clothes and food. Maybe I can make him dinner tonight. I almost trip over Sue, who’s snoozing at the side of the bed.

“How long have you been there?”

She gets up, stretching her two long front legs as she arches her back. I give her a long pet as she rubs herself against my leg. She walks over toward the door, and I let her out before I go put some clothes on. I wonder if Xavier is in the house.

No, I’m going to leave him alone. I will *not* be needy. My insecurities from my mother start to creep in again. She always said I was too much. That I needed too much attention and didn’t know when to stop. She called me a clinger. My eyes

sting at the memories. I don't want Xavier to think those things about me. I couldn't bear it if he did.

I grab a matching set of panties and bra before pulling on a sundress. My eyes roam over the shoes. I'm sure I should wear sandals or something, but I grab the plain white tennis shoes.

"Laura." I let out a small scream and spin around to see Scott stepping into the closet. I stand there for a second, shocked to see him.

"I've come to get you out of here." He holds his hand out for me. I stare at it. "Laura." He says my name with a little more force. "We don't have a lot of time."

"I like it here," I admit.

Scott looks around the closet before shaking his head. "You like it here because he's made you think he's some great guy when he's not."

I wring my hands together. From everything I've seen, Xavier seems pretty great to me. Besides all the bargaining to get me and keeping me as a collateral thing. Other than those things—totally in the past, right?

"That's not true. He saved us. He's been good to me. Really good to me." My cheeks warm.

"Keeping you as a prisoner is good to you?"

I still don't understand that. Maybe he's lonely, too. I don't know why. A man like Xavier should have women falling all over him. I've never even asked if he was with anyone else. I'm going to guess he's not married, because he's here every night. Where does he go when he leaves here?

"Laura," Scott snaps.

"I want to stay. I'll talk to Xavier. I'm sure he'll work something out about the money."

Scott closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"I didn't want to show you this, but you've given me no other choice." He pulls out his phone and turns it my way. My hand flies over my mouth, and I close my eyes. It's a picture of the

man from yesterday, the one who was flirting with me, and he's definitely dead. It looked like someone used him as a punching bag.

"You're not the only girl."

I shake my head, not believing the words coming from my brother. There can't be others. The way Xavier looks at me says so. He'd know it would hurt me, and Xavier never hurts me. He protects me from everyone that tries to.

"Really, Laura? You don't think he doesn't have a few mistresses?"

"I'll ask him." I take a step back.

"He's got you." Scott looks around the closet again. "You're like a shiny new toy to him that he doesn't want to take out of the package."

I bite my bottom lip, because that didn't sound terrible. Doesn't that mean he thinks I'm priceless? That he wants me untouched unless it's by his hands alone? He *does* call me precious. Or am I just making excuses? My eyes start to sting and water.

"Let me talk to him, Scott. Maybe he can explain what—"

Scott shakes his head. "He's not a good man, Laura."

"But he saved us."

"No he didn't. It was all staged." He runs a hand down his face. "I don't know how he did it, but he did. He made sure I got in deep so he could come in and save the day. He's the reason we were in that room. The reason you were scared out of your mind and making deals with slimy men."

I close my eyes as I remember being back there. That room. The saw. A chill runs up my spine, my throat going tight. I'd never been so scared in my life. Xavier wouldn't do that to me. Would he? Had he wanted me so badly that he'd gone through with this elaborate plan?

"Laura, Xavier controls all the bookies in this town. He had the power to clear my debt with nothing more than a word. He didn't need you for collateral. He *owns* Fat Tommy."

I don't tell my brother he's wrong. Because the more I think about it, the more it falls into place, to my horror. It's too much of a coincidence that Xavier asked me out so many times and then this all happened. He was there to save the day. He got me to offer myself. But not until *after* I thought they were going to kill my brother and then me. I'd thought about the coincidence when I first got here, but the longer I was with Xavier, I couldn't believe he'd do that to me.

"We don't have much time. He'll be back soon." Scott holds his hand out to me again.

A tear rolls down my cheek. How pathetic am I that I still want to stay? My mom really did a job on me. The first time someone gives me attention, and I take it no matter what. I know I can't stay. I won't ever be able to trust him. He's a good actor. I'll never know what's real and what's fake. I take Scott's hand this time.

My heart breaks more with each step I take away from Xavier. So much for him never hurting me.

XAVIER

“*T*his isn’t a fucking joke, Cain.” I keep my tone level, despite the fact I’d like to break his neck. “Henley is just a symptom of the disease you’ve brought into my organization.” I lean across my desk, glaring at him. “And he came back here to kill me.” The thought of him harming Laura, of her possibly being in the line of fire, sets my rage alight all over again.

“You killed him. I’m not sure what else you’d like me to do about it.” Cain’s tone is just as even as mine.

“Dispose of him. Inform his family and his connections of what went down.”

“Name you?” His eyebrows rise.

“Yes. Let it serve as a warning.” I wave a hand at him. “Don’t fuck with Vegas. This city is mine. Understand?”

He nods. “Yes, but Henley isn’t just some—”

“Henley’s dead. I’ll kill anyone who comes to my home and threatens me or the ones I love. Don’t fucking doubt it, Cain.”

He leans back and nods. “I see. The girl?”

“She’s mine.” My fingers curl into fists.

“I didn’t touch her.” He shrugs. “Other than accidentally. I wasn’t sure if you’d killed Henley for coming on to her.”

“I would have.” I grit my teeth. “But no, I killed him before he could gut me in my own home.”

“I understand. His associates will accept that explanation.”

“It’s the way of our world. If they have a problem with me defending my family, I’ll happily give them an in-person demonstration.” I stand. This meeting is over.

Cain stands, too, deference in his mien, though he’s no fucking goon. He used to be my second in command until I set him on his own path. He runs the underground fighting rings in the city. Once a sliver of my business, now it’s a big earner for Cain, and I get a nice percentage. He’s making a name for himself. I reviewed the video of his interaction with Laura. He’s clear. But Henley? He would’ve met a bloody end with or without threatening my life. No one touches my girl.

“Out. I have business.”

“Something important?”

“Very.” I walk him out of my office and toward the front door.

“Our business keeps us on our toes. Never a moment’s rest.”

Della turns a corner ahead of us. “I have that Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Uzbekistan ready, and I’m about to make the popcorn.” She bustles past.

“Important business, eh?” Cain grins.

“Fuck off.” I open the front door for him. “And don’t bring any more security threats into my house. Got it?”

“My apologies. He’d been vouched for, but I suppose we can’t trust anyone anymore. Not with the way this city is going.”

“Trust is a luxury we can’t afford.” I give him a stern nod, then close the door.

I slap my palms together and rub them in anticipation. Not for the movies, but for what Laura had promised to do to me the next time we were in the theater room. My cock wakes at the thought of it, and I speed my steps along the hall.

The smell of popcorn wafts to my nose as I take the steps two at a time. When I glance into our bedroom, I don’t find Laura. Sue is snoring lightly at the foot of the bed. Laura must already be in position for the movie-thon. I smile at the

thought of it, of how pleasant it is to just sit and watch movies with her. And when she gets excited and explains what's different in the books or gives me tidbits of background here and there, I can't help but love her. She truly is priceless, the missing treasure that's made me a whole man instead of just a bitter shell.

I bound up the stairs to the movie room and hit the house lights.

I stop.

She's not here. I cock my head to the side. Where is she? A tickle of dread rolls down my spine.

Whirling, I rush back down the stairs to our bedroom. My heavy steps wake Sue, who jumps to attention, her ears sharp. I dart into the bathroom. No Laura. The closet is also empty. Where the fuck is she?

My heart starts to pound as I hurry down the stairs to my office. I pull up the surveillance cams on my computer and search around until I find her. And not just her. Scott.

"Fuck!" I slam my fist on the desk when I see them disappear across the rooftop of my house and onto the stony ridge that runs along the back wall.

"What'd I miss?" Della leans against the doorframe and nibbles some popcorn.

"She's gone." I run a hand through my hair.

"Yeah. I know."

"You knew?" I step around my desk and glare down at her.

"And you didn't stop her?"

"Nope." She shrugs. "She was with her brother. She's safe. Have you never heard the whole 'if you love something, let it go' thing?"

"Della." I've never wanted to hurt Della. Not once. But right this second? I'm contemplating all sorts of violence. "Why didn't you tell me?"

“Listen, if you want her, you have to win her. Not keep her captive. If you hadn’t let her go, she wouldn’t have stayed. Eventually, she’d have learned the truth about how she came to be here in the first place, and then where would you be?” She taps the side of her nose. “You’d be right where you are now. Alone. At least this way, you can explain it to her and give her a chance to choose you. Not choose *for* her. Understand?”

“You let her go.” I keep trying to breathe, to remember that Della is the closest thing I have to a big sister.

“I just said that.” She crunches some more popcorn. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t chase her.” She waggles her eyebrows. “How do you think I landed Esmeralda? Just sitting around and let her run off? No, I chased her. Told her my truths and let her judge for herself.”

I try to listen to her, but all I feel is the yawning pit in my chest. My priceless Laura is gone, the most precious gift I’ve ever ... stolen. I take a deep breath. Laura is a gift, and I didn’t receive it, I *took* it. But that’s who I am. I take what I want. But then, how can Laura choose me? How can it be real if she doesn’t have a choice? I rub my temples.

“I see I’m getting through to you for once.” She smiles, her eyes just as kind as they’ve always been. “Go get her, Xavier. Show her you can be a good man.”

“Only for her.” I drop my hands.

She shrugs. “Of course. Be bad to your enemies, but good to your bride.” She turns to leave, then holds up a finger. “Speaking of that, what are we doing with the stiff in the basement?”

“Cain’s taking care of it. It’s his mess.” I rush back to my desk and grab my keys.

“Good. I hate all the work it takes to get rid of a body.” She wrinkles her nose. “Hurts my back.”

“I’m going to get her.” I hurry past her and into the hall.

“Bring her back.” Della grins and reaches down to pet Sue. “Bring her back to all of us.”

LAURA

“*Y*ou’re scaring me.”

I turn to look at Scott. I have no idea how long we’ve been driving. It’s all been a blur. I feel numb. I try to force a small smile, because I can see the worry etched into his face. I wish life could’ve been different for him. Scott means well, but he’s always getting himself into trouble, and I know it’s turning him inside out that this time his mess touched me. I can only hope this has made him think about his ways and makes him really change.

“I’m fine. It’s a lot to take in.” My emotions are all over the place. The sadness that I’m feeling threatens to escape me, but I hold it together.

He reaches out and grabs my hand, wrapping his fingers around mine. “You’re freezing. Why didn’t you say something?” He flips on the heat.

“This is Vegas. It’s never freezing.” He’s right. Could I really be in shock? After all I’ve gone through this week, I can’t believe this is what shocks me.

“Where are we going?” I ask. Does it really matter?

“I don’t know, to be honest.” He suddenly presses on the gas, speeding up.

I glance in the mirror thinking maybe he saw something. His phone starts to ring, drawing my attention back to him. He pulls it out and looks at the number before powering it off altogether.

“You’re tired.” I can see the exhaustion under his eyes.

“And you can’t drive a stick.”

“We can drive off the road a bit and park somewhere. You can sleep for a while, and then once you’re rested we’ll figure this out.”

“We need to get out of Vegas. I’ll drive for a few hours, and then we’ll stop.”

I nod, a knot forming in my throat at the thought of us essentially being on the run. I can tell Scott’s whole body is filled with tension and worry.

“He won’t kill you.” He jerks his head over to look at me.

“What makes you say that?” Somehow, I already know Xavier wouldn’t harm me in the physical sense. He’d already broken my heart, so I don’t have to worry about that. My concern is more for Scott once Xavier figures out I’m missing. But I don’t say that to him. I have to hope that whatever Xavier felt for me was enough to keep Scott alive.

“I think it’s pretty fucking clear Xavier will do just about anything to get his hands on you.”

“But he didn’t hurt me. Except that first night when he scared me. He won’t hurt you, because he’ll know it’ll upset me.”

“He wouldn’t tell you, Laura. You think men like Xavier get to where they are by announcing all the dirty deeds they’ve done? He knows I’ll keep trying to save you from him. Trust me. He’s going to want me dead.”

I look down at my cold hands.

“Don’t make him into something he’s not. He puts on a good show. Remember that.”

Scott’s right. Xavier set my brother up and then kidnapped me. I have to keep reminding myself that Xavier wasn’t who he seemed to be.

I think I’m most upset at myself. I’m so desperate for love that I’m trying to make up excuses for a very bad man. I turn back

to look out the window, my eyes stinging with tears. I don't want to cry.

"I'm sorry I got you into this." I hate the quaver in my voice.

"This isn't your doing."

"It kind of is." If it wasn't for me, this wouldn't be happening. Xavier not only went after my weakness, but he went after Scott's too.

"It doesn't matter. It's time for a new start." He tries to make his tone light. I'm not so sure it will be that easy. How can you have a new start when you don't have a penny to your name? When you can't even go to your home to retrieve the only belongings you do have? I have no doubt that we can't use our real names.

Somehow, I know that Xavier will leave no stone unturned to find me. And with all the money, power, and connections that man has, it seems as if the odds are really stacked against us this time. I think we're all but screwed.

He's going to find us. It's inevitable.

"Fuck." I hear my brother shout before bright lights blind me, and my world explodes. The sound of crushing metal and shattering glass fills my ears as the world spins before everything goes dark.

"Xavier." I breathe his name as I try to open my eyes. They're so heavy. I touch my pounding forehead and feel something warm and wet as I finally get my eyes to open. Only to see bright lights shining on my blood-coated fingers. How could I feel colder than before?

"Run. Xavier found us," Scott chokes out. His eyes are still closed. "Run, Laura."

I unclick my seatbelt and try to get to him.

"Scott. Look at me," I demand, but his head drops forward. I scream his name as I get out of the car so that I can go around to the driver's side to help him. I'm unsteady on my feet, but that's not what stops me. I look up to see a man I've never seen before.

“I’m starting to see why there is so much trouble over one little girl.” The man’s accent is so thick I almost don’t understand what he says. “Put her into the trunk. Leave that one. He’ll let Xavier know who was here.” He pushes me into another man who smells of whiskey.

I try and fight, but my head pounds as spots dance in my eyes.

“She’s feisty.”

I scream when he throws me over his shoulder, my head wanting to explode as he carries me off. I tell myself to fight, but I can barely get myself to move now. He drops me hard into something. I stare up to see three men in suits who are all talking. I don’t know if my head is pounding so hard that I’m confused or if they aren’t speaking English.

“Don’t stop screaming. I like the sound,” the one in the middle says. I think it’s the one who picked me up.

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy yours, too,” I grit out. The smile on his face drops away as he reaches for me, and the sounds of gunfire fill the air.

XAVIER

Something inside me breaks apart when I see the wreck. It's all happening too fucking fast. The Russians didn't waste any time. That prick Henley must've alerted them about Laura before I ended his game of wannabe gangster.

"Fuck!" I can't do anything except will my car to go faster despite the pedal being on the floor.

When I round the dusty desert curve and find the smoking wreck, I snap. Fear like I've never felt floods into me. Fear for Laura. For the one I value above all others. And behind that fear another emotion wells up. It's one I know well. Rage. The kind that always ends with bodies on the floor.

The black SUV that rammed Scott's car comes to a stop. I'm still half a mile away, my car eating up the pavement as my blood boils.

I take a breath when I see her climb from the passenger side. But then she stumbles, and a man grabs her.

My knuckles go white on the steering wheel, and I grit my teeth.

They are going to die. Every last one of them. I count five on this dry stretch of lonely highway. Five graves I won't bother to dig.

The asshole throws her into a trunk. Motherfuckers.

I reach the smoking car and throw my parking brake as I wrench the wheel to the left. My car goes into a screeching

drift, and I take out two Russians easily, each of their thumps against my fender like musical notes.

Righting the car, I slam on the brakes and reach for my gun. It's already in hand as I throw the door open and start firing. They weren't expecting me. I can tell from the surprised looks on their faces as I cut them down under the bright sun, their blood soaking into the cracked roadway.

"Xavier!" Gregori calls and throws his hands up.

His other men drop. They didn't even fire a shot. One writhes on the ground just ahead of me. I stomp on the wound in his stomach, and when he yowls in pain, I shoot him between the eyes.

Gregori shakes his head. "Xavier, let's talk about this."

"Talk?" I advance on him. "You steal my most precious asset from me, and now you want to talk?"

The blazing sun is nothing compared to the molten anger that blasts inside me when I see Laura, her eyes closed, her face pale, and blood on her forehead.

"The accident was an ..." He swallows. "Accident. We only intended to clip them." He shrugs. "We can talk this out. If you kill me, you'll be starting something big. You know this. My family will come for you. The five families, all of them will band together to take Vegas if you—"

"Let them come." I point my gun at his forehead.

His gaze flicks to my left.

Fuck. I turn but not fast enough to stop his dying goon from firing. The shot hits me in the thigh.

I put a bullet into the asshole's heart, but when I swing back to Gregori, he's pulled Laura from the trunk and holds her to him. Her body is limp, and he holds a knife to her side.

"I am getting in my car with the girl, and we're leaving." Spittle coats his lips at the terror in his words. "You aren't going to move, understand? Put the gun down."

"This gun?" I waggle it.

“Xavier!” He grimaces. “Put it down.”

“Too chickenshit to kill me?” I can feel warm blood trickling down my calf.

“You know what happens if I kill you.” He shakes his head. “I can’t risk it. But I will if I have to.”

“I will go to war for her, Gregori. I will kill as many members of the five families as I can, and I’ll start with yours. Give her to me now, or I will hunt you like a fucking animal and slaughter you like one, too.”

“Drop it or I’ll gut her!” he bellows, the fear invading his voice and making it quake.

I hold the gun up high, pointing it to the blue above. He follows the movement with his gaze.

“The fuck you doing?” he steps back, dragging my Laura with him.

I pull the trigger.

He takes another step back. “What the fuck?”

“You want to know what I’m doing?” I drop the gun and toss it to the side. I shrug. “I’m distracting you, you piece of shit.”

Scott grabs Gregori’s arm and wrenches the knife away from Laura. I rush forward and catch her before she falls, then gently lay her on the ground.

Gregori and a bloody Scott are fighting for the knife.

I rush over and, with a hard kick, blow out Gregori’s knee. He drops to the pavement with a howl of pain.

I jump on him and wrench the knife from his hand as Scott stumbles backward, his face dazed.

“Xavier!” Gregori cries, but the sound is cut off as I slice through his voice box and even deeper. Then I finish with the knife in his heart. “No one takes my precious Laura from me. Rot in hell, and if your family comes for me or my Laura, I will kill them out here in the desert just like I did you.” I wrench the knife to the right, twisting it deep as the life vanishes from Gregori’s eyes.

A thump pulls my attention away, and I see Scott has passed out on the median. In the distance something glints. A car coming from Vegas, taking the desert highway.

We have to get out of here.

I leave the knife embedded—a warning to any who try to touch my territory—and rush to Laura. She’s still out. Worry sinks deep into my gut as I look at her pale cheeks. I gently scoop her into my arms and rush her to my car. After placing her gingerly in the backseat, I go back for Scott and place him in the passenger seat, even going so far as to fasten his seatbelt. It’s what Laura would want, so I do it.

I gun the engine, and with a kick of sand and dust, we take off and leave the wreckage behind us. My eyes constantly glance to the rearview to check on Laura. She’s breathing, but I don’t like the cut on her head or the way she seems so still. Laura is never still. She’s electric. A bolt of life and love.

“Hang on, Laura. Just hang on.” I dial my doctor and order him to my house.

He’ll be there when I arrive.

I’ve worried before. About winning battles with other kingpins. About growing my own empire. But that was nothing compared to the worry that eats me up inside when I look at Laura.

“I love you, precious. I love you so much,” I whisper under my breath and floor it, hoping like hell that she’ll be okay and that I’ll have a chance to make all this up to her.

LAURA

“*P*recious. Open your eyes for me,” I hear someone say. No, not someone, it’s my Xavier. I try to open them, but I can’t. My head pounds as I try to remember what happened. Am I dreaming? “You can’t leave me.” I feel his mouth brush against mine.

“Leave her alone.” I swear I hear Scott’s voice, but how could that be?

“Don’t make me throw you out.”

I hear the familiar laugh of my brother Scott. It *is* him. I try to open my eyes to see for myself, but I can’t. I remain in the blackness, my confusion growing by the second.

“You need me here, and you know it. You’re not going to do shit to me.” A warm hand takes mine. “Rest. You’re safe. I won’t let him take you again.”

Let who take me? Xavier? I try to open my mouth to speak as Xavier and Scott start to argue. Their voices get farther and farther away until finally sleep takes me.

The next time I wake, the room is quiet except for a beeping sound. I feel a hand holding mine once again. It’s familiar and comforting. I manage to get my eyes open a little bit to see Xavier with his hand in mine. His head is down, staring at the floor as his thumb drifts back and forth against my skin. He looks defeated. Before he can see that I’m awake, my eyes fall closed again. I try with everything I have to open them when I hear my brother.

“You look like shit. Eat something and shower.”

“No.”

“You do know that sitting next to her won’t help her wake up, right? She’ll come to when she wants. When she’s ready.”

“No,” he says again. “I’m not leaving her.”

“I’ll get you food, and you’ll fucking eat it only because I know my sister cares about you for some fucked up reason.” I can hear Scott’s retreating steps as he leaves the room. It’s not long before Xavier starts to read to me once again. Something that he’s been doing. His voice has been one of the only things that has been soothing me and keeping me calm.

“Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

Sleep takes me.

I blink my eyes open, my head no longer pounding. It takes them a moment to adjust to the light. I look over to see Xavier once again sitting next to the bed. His hand holds mine. Scott is here too. He’s sleeping on a sofa across the room. We’re in one of the guest rooms at Xavier’s. Everything starts flooding back to me. Scott’s words about what Xavier had done, the car crash, Scott’s lifeless body, and the men who had tried to take me.

I try to pull my hand from Xavier’s to touch my head, but his hold only tightens. His head lifts, his dark eyes meeting mine. He looks tired, and worry etches the corners of his eyes.

“Laura.” He’s on his feet. “How do you feel?” He cups my face in his giant hands.

“Sleepy?”

He leans down and presses his mouth to mine gently. I should push him away, but I’m weak when it comes to him. It might be our last kiss for all I know. When he releases my mouth from his, he rests his forehead against mine. The anguish on his face has a knot forming in my throat.

He's in love with me. I'm not sure what to do with that information, but I know in my heart he is. If I was merely a plaything, I don't think he'd be this torn up about me being hurt. Right now, he looks like he'd follow me into death.

"Are you both okay?" I ask. "How did you get me out of the trunk?" The last thing I remember before being in this bed was that trunk. As scared as I'd been, I knew Xavier was going to come for me. He'll never stop coming for me.

"Yeah, your boyfriend lost his shit and took a bullet to his thigh." Scott says, making me gasp. I try to sit up, but Xavier doesn't let me.

"You were shot?"

"Precious. Don't get up until the doctor clears you." He doesn't answer my question.

"Answer me," I snip. I shouldn't care if he's been shot. He had it coming. But I care all the same.

"I'm fine. It was a graze. I only needed a few stitches." Xavier shoots my brother a glare. Scott looks unfazed by it. "You worried about me?" He drops his gaze back down to mine.

"I don't know what I am when it comes to you." I shake my head. "Scott." I hold my hand out to my brother. He comes over and takes it. "Are you okay? You scared the crap out of me. I couldn't get you to wake up." My eyes once again burn with tears.

"A few bumps is all." Scott looks over at Xavier. "I want a minute with my sister."

"I'm not leaving."

"Xavier. I want to talk to my brother alone."

His jaw flexes, but he steps back.

"You've got five minutes." He stalks from the room. He almost looks as if he's pouting.

It's kind of cute.

"He's intense." Scott lets out a long breath.

“You don’t seem scared of him.” I drop my head back, already feeling tired. I have no idea how long I’ve been out.

“You were right. He’s not going to hurt me because of you.” He shakes his head and comes around to the chair Xavier had been sitting in. “Can’t kill me either because that would upset you.” He lets out a low chuckle. “I still can’t believe my little sister is one of the most powerful people in Vegas.”

“What?”

“You’ve got that man wrapped around your finger. I don’t think there’s a thing he wouldn’t do for you if you asked.”

“Except set me free.” I lick my dry lips.

Scott nods. I don’t tell him that whenever Xavier says he’ll never let me go, I get this thrill. He did everything he could to have me, and I’m still not sure what to do with that.

My head starts to throb again. I’m in love with him and fighting an inner battle of what is right and wrong.

“I don’t think you want to be set free.” Scott stands. My eyes start to feel heavy again.

“Time’s up.” Xavier comes back into the room.

“That was two minutes.” Scott fights a smile. Are these two friends now or something? “I’m going to go clean myself up before Xavier throws me out of here.” He leans down and kisses my forehead. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” He heads out of the room, leaving us alone.

“Precious—”

“I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Okay.” He starts to sit back down.

“Don’t let this go to your head, but will you come up here?” I scoot over in the bed, inviting him to join me. He stands and kicks off his shoes before slipping into the bed with me. I rest my head on his chest. His whole body relaxes under me.

I know he thinks he wants me more than anything. As much as I get a thrill from that, I’m not sure Xavier really knows me.

The parts I try to keep hidden from everyone. The need I have to wrap myself around him and never let go. He's not the only one who knows about obsession.

What would happen when he grew tired of me? I think losing my heart to him is scarier than that night in that room with Fat Tommy.

“Relax and stop thinking so much.” He rubs my back. “Rest. I promise everything will be okay.”

I nod my head, closing my eyes, believing him, and trying to believe in us.

XAVIER

She shifts next to me, then her eyes slowly open, focusing on me.

“Laura,” I say softly and stroke her hair.

“Why did you do those things?”

I’ve done a great many things, plenty of them bad, but I suspect I know what she’s referring to. All the same, I need clarification.

“Which things?”

Her brows draw together. I reach up and smooth my thumb along the crease on her forehead. She sighs and closes her eyes.

“Don’t scrunch your face. It’ll pull at the bandage,” I keep my tone soft, safe. “My doctor checked you over and put in a few stitches. It will likely scar, despite his best efforts, but it’s above your hairline. Invisible.”

“Oh.” She puts a hand up to her bandage.

“I can call him in and have him check it if you—”

“No. Mama hen,” she grumbles. “But you have to answer me. Why did you let Fat Tommy—” She starts to scrunch again.

“I’ll explain everything. Just relax for me, all right?” I stroke that little wrinkle again until it disappears.

“I’m relaxed.” She tries to cross her arms, but only manages to pin them sort of between us. But she seems satisfied, and

there's no scrunching, so I let it go.

I go through the litany of reasons and explanations I'd mentally rehearsed, the carefully planned and plotted logic of it. But when it comes to Laura, I'm not logical. She's the only one who's ever made me have a gut reaction. Hell, I just started a war with the Russians over her, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. She's my Helen of Troy—the woman I'd burn down the world for. How can I explain all that without sounding like a psycho? I can't.

"I'm waiting." She tries to sound petulant but only manages to look even cuter.

I ditch my reasoning and just go straight to the heart of it. "I did all those things—set up your brother, sicced Fat Tommy on him, and brought you into it. I did it because I wanted you."

Her eyes open. "I want a Birkin bag, but that doesn't mean I go in there and strongarm the nice lady to give it to me."

"Well, I would do exactly that." I shrug slightly. "I take what I want. And when I see something valuable, I keep thinking about it, ways to get it, what I have to do to keep it—I don't stop until I have it."

"And I'm like that to you? Just a possession?" The hurt in her voice pierces me like a bullet.

"No." I stroke her soft hair. "At first, all I knew was that you were valuable, someone important to me. It's like a sixth sense."

"Your scar was tingling?" she whispers.

I can't help my smile. "Yes, you could say that."

"Slytherin over here tingling for a kidnapping." More grumbling, but she uncrosses her arms and scoots a little closer.

"I kept asking you out. You kept denying me. I had to do something. Letting you slip away wasn't an option. Now it's my turn for a question. Why did you keep turning me down?"

"Because you didn't know me, and I didn't know you. We still don't know each other," she huffs.

“Don’t we?” I press my palm to her cheek and turn her face to me. “I know you always like the book better than the movie, you do a cute little snore on the exhale sometimes, you like a lot of cream with a little coffee, sometimes you get stuck on a thought or an idea and have to research it and look at it from every angle, and sometimes you have entire conversations with Sue when you think I’m not around. I also know I adore you, Della adores you, and Sue adores you. You’re the only woman I’ve ever had in my home that’s not Della or business. I made a mistake that first night. I can admit that. I should’ve never let Fat Tommy scare you the way he did. He took it too far.”

“That’s right!” She smacks my arm. “You shouldn’t have.”

Not hard. Not anything like what I deserve. I’ll take any punishment she wants, just so long as she stays with me.

“I was scared to death.” She glares at me.

“I know, and I’m sorry, precious. I swear on my life I never would’ve let them hurt you.”

“The saw.” She shudders.

“I know.” I press my forehead to hers. “I know, and I’m sorry. If you want me to drag Fat Tommy up here and watch as I use the saw on him, I’d be more than happy to—”

“Eww, gross. No.” She wrinkles her nose but leaves the forehead alone this time. “You’d do that?”

“I’d do a hell of a lot more than that to gain your trust. You’re precious to me. Can’t you see that?” I swallow hard. “I’m obsessed with you, Laura. I can’t stop thinking about you. I was afraid I’d hurt you, so I stayed away from you. But I can’t do it. There’s no way I won’t chase you to the ends of the earth. You’re the most precious thing in the world to me. Priceless. And I love you with everything I am.”

Her eyes water.

I swipe away a tear. “Please don’t cry.”

“How can I not cry when you just said all those things?” Her lip wobbles, and I lean in and kiss her.

She grips my shoulder, her body pressing into mine as I kiss her with every bit of my devotion. Can she feel it?

She opens her mouth, inviting me in. I massage my tongue against hers and run a hand down to her hip, pulling her tightly against me. She's injured, recovering from trauma, but I'm fucking starved for her. And when the heat of her pussy grazes against my hard cock, I groan into her mouth.

She answers with her fingers in my hair and a moan of her own.

When I finally come up for air, she pants and licks her lips.

"My priceless Laura." I kiss the tip of her nose, her forehead, her cheeks. "I can't live without you."

"Good." She runs her fingers along the stubble of my jaw. "Because I'm in love with you. And, honestly, more than a little obsess—"

I claim her lips again, my heart bursting with more emotions than I can name, and I kiss her until we're both out of breath and deeply, perfectly in love.

EPILOGUE

LAURA

J open one eye when I feel Xavier's big hands massaging me. Or pretending to massage me when all he's really doing is putting another layer of sunscreen on me. I giggle at his protective nature. Nothing has changed when it comes to that. He's always concerned with my safety.

"You don't have to be sneaky when applying sunscreen." I sit up. Xavier hands me my ice water. I take it, drinking half of it down before handing it back to him.

"Are you hungry?"

"I ate five minutes ago." I stretch my arms out, causing my bikini to ride up. Xavier's eyes go to my tits, which are bigger now. It's one of the advantages of being knocked up. The down side is having a husband who hovers over you, making sure you drink enough water and eat what you should.

"You slept for an hour." He grunts.

"So I ate an hour and five minutes ago?" I tease. His eyes are still focused on my tits. That hungry, possessive look is in his eyes that never grows old. I might say his hovering annoys me sometimes, but I wouldn't change it for the world. I can't imagine a day without him by my side. He taught me what true love is.

Xavier takes care of me. It's so different from the life I had before. No one ever took care of me. That's all my husband seems to want to do, so it's a win-win for me. Why would I stop him from doing something he loves and something I enjoy tremendously?

“Don’t get smart with me.” He gives the inside of my thigh a light smack that goes straight to my clit, making me gasp. He smirks, knowing exactly what he’s doing. I thought my appetite for him was big before, but now that I’m pregnant, it’s at an entirely different level. I can’t get enough of my handsome husband.

“I think my feet need sunscreen, too.” I grab the baby book next to me in the cabana and pretend to be annoyed with him. Not that he’s buying it. He moves to my feet, rubbing them for me.

“Our baby is the size of—”

“A banana,” he says before me, making me smile. I’m slow going with reading the pregnancy books. Xavier is the exact opposite. I think he has them memorized. I let out a moan when he presses his knuckle into the bottom of my foot. He grunts in return at the sound. My nipples tighten. It’s the same grunt he makes in my ear when he’s close to coming.

“Do you want to stay a few extra days?” he asks.

I put the book back down. “No, I miss Sue and Della. Plus, I should check on my brother.”

“He’s fine.”

“I also ordered a bunch of stuff for the baby’s room, and I want to see it,” I admit. I’m getting out of control with this nursery. Thankfully my man thinks it’s adorable. I’m not sure I want to see the bills. Not that I feel bad. Xavier is loaded, and he kidnapped me, so I shouldn’t have a budget. I love that I get to pull that card out whenever I’m about to get in trouble.

“Then we’ll leave tomorrow.” I let out a sigh when he kisses my foot. I do love it here on the island. It’s our little getaway where we don’t have to worry about anything or anyone. It’s only him and me. He brought me here last year for our honeymoon. Now we’ve been coming about every three months. This will probably be the last time we come before our little bundle of joy arrives.

He keeps kissing his way up my leg. I spread my thighs apart for him, my body wanting what he’s about to give me. That

wonderful mouth of his could get me to do anything. He pulls at the strings on the sides of my bikini bottoms before pulling them off me and tossing them away.

“Wet already?” He gives me a cocky grin that he has every right to have. The man is damn sexy, and I know the pleasure he can give me.

“You’re near me. Of course I’m already wet.”

He runs his finger down my sex, making me whimper.

“Take the top off.” His voice is gruffer now, and I love that I can do that to him.

I pull it off and toss it to the side.

“My precious is being a good girl today.”

“For now.” I lift my hips, wanting his mouth on me already. “Don’t tease me, or I’ll be bad.”

“Never.” He buries his face between my legs. The first orgasm is quick. Too quick, but Xavier knows my body better than I do. And I know there will be plenty more pleasure to come. He licks and sucks until he pulls another one from me, my whole body buzzing with pleasure.

I open my eyes to stare up at him.

He runs a hand through his hair. “Fuck, you’re beautiful. I don’t know what I did in this life to get you.”

“Kidnap me?” I smirk.

“You’re never going to let that one go, are you?”

As scared as I was that night, I wouldn’t take it back. Xavier kept fighting for us when I kept turning him down. His plan was crazy, but it had worked out. Us being here is a testament to that. He’s given me a beautiful life with so much love. Not to mention the little girl growing inside me. He also accomplished something I could never seem to. He keeps my brother in line. I know he only does that one for me. It’s another way of him showing me how much he loves me.

“I think you should kidnap me yourself next time. Tie me to the bed.”

He groans, his mouth coming down on mine in a deep kiss. I push at his chest and he lets me roll him over as he kicks off his swim trunks.

I grip his cock in my hand as I slide down over it. I let out a moan, my head dropping back. He's so deep this way. I feel so full. I'll never get enough of this man. I look down at him as his fingers trail along the small baby bump that popped out a couple weeks ago. I didn't think my husband could desire me more, but I'd been wrong.

"Are you the one teasing now?"

"Never." I rise up and push back down. He grabs my hips, taking control of my motions as he takes what he wants. *Me.*

"Touch yourself," he grits out. I slip my hand between my thighs to rub my clit. My other hand goes to my breast to pull on my nipple. He lets out a loud groan. I know how much he enjoys watching me touch myself.

"That's it. Touch that sweet pussy and make me come." His dirty words spur me on.

His legs begin to tense below me, and I know he's about to come, but he's fighting it. He won't let himself until I do. My eyes meet his. The raw need I see there for me sends me over the edge. He keeps moving my hips for me as his release spills. He milks out my orgasm, making sure I get every bit of pleasure before I collapse on top of him with his cock still inside.

His hands roam up and down my back as my eyes fall closed. I turn my head and kiss his chest. This man was made for me. The one thing I feared would scare him off is one of the things he loves most about me.

He loves when I'm clingy and want to be near him. That I'm always seeking him out. He understands it because he's the same way. We're a perfect fit for each other.

Both madly in love and most definitely *obsessed*.

HITMAN'S HEART

HITMAN'S HEART

MINK

I'm good at my job. Taking people out doesn't give me any heartburn, especially when it means my bank account grows fatter after each assignment. So what if I drink away the days between missions, and maybe I try to forget all the things I've done—I'm not soft. Not for anyone... Except her. Margaret. My little ray of sunshine, the only bright spot in this world of darkness. She's the only thing I have to look forward to, and when she's threatened, I can't sit idly by. Not even when I'm ordered to take her life or lose my own. I'll keep her hidden and safe, but how will I protect her from myself?

My phone vibrates.

I ignore it and take another swig from my bottle. This is the cooldown, the time when I lay low after a particularly high profile job. Drinking, Netflix, and chilling with Bernie. That's it. Nothing else.

"Look at this shit." I point at the huge TV on the wall of my dark bedroom.

Bernie glances at me.

"Not me. This show. This guy has all these tigers, but he doesn't even treat them right. And he wants to off this Carole chick, but he doesn't even give the Brotherhood a call? I'm calling bullshit on this whole thing." I turn the show off and toss the remote.

Bernie watches it sail across the room, then returns his feline eyes to me.

"What?" I shrug.

I finish off my bottle and drop it to the rug by the bed. It clinks into another one. I only drink during the cooldown. When I'm on the job, not a drop. And my last job went on for three months. Three lost months of stalking a particular target through the streets of Tangiers, along the banks of the Seine, and finally in a Scottish castle where he'd amassed a fortune in weapons, drugs, and trafficked women.

Killing him was easy. Waiting for the go-ahead was the part that stuck in my craw. All that time wasted as I followed him

from back room to back room, brothel to brothel, drug den to drug den. I trailed in his filthy wake, my gun loaded with three bullets I'd marked in ink with my signature. But I couldn't move until I got the go-ahead from Mr. Baines.

Once I had it, I took the piece of shit out. Two bullets in his head and one in his heart. Once it was done, I returned home, crawled into my bed, and commenced drinking.

"You know what I like about you, Bernie?" I grab a fresh bottle from my nightstand and open it with my teeth. "I like that you don't judge me." I spit the lid across the room.

He stares at me, and though I'd like to believe he doesn't judge me, the look in his eyes says different. Maybe he doesn't judge me for the work I do, for the contracts I take from Mr. Baines, for all the blood on my hands—but he does judge me for wallowing in my evil deeds with bottles of Jack and shitty streaming programming.

"When I left the Red Dragons, I thought maybe you and me would land some cushy corporate security job." I toast to him and take a swig.

I had landed that cushy job, or so I'd thought. But Charleton Baines isn't your average businessman. He's as cruel as the day is long, and if he makes an enemy, that person's life expectancy goes to jack shit. Because of me. Because I'm a killer. And now that I'm beholden to Baines, I can't escape.

Doing his dirty work is the price I pay for a favor. I knew the cost when I asked it. But I didn't know it was an empty bargain, one that would leave me indebted for the rest of my life.

"At least I've got you." I tilt the bottle toward Bernie. "Right?"

He licks the back of his paw and swipes at his ear.

"Yep. I've got you."

And Margaret, my mind whispers.

But Margaret isn't mine. No amount of alcohol can change that fact. Besides, she's afraid of me. It's as if she knows I'm

no good whenever I show up at Baines Corp. Some primitive part of her mind senses that I'm a bad man, and she keeps her eyes down when I walk in. Even though I'm dressed like the other men, say the right things, wear the right watch—she still knows I don't fit.

But I know she doesn't fit, either. Margaret should never have taken a job as Mr. Baines' personal assistant. She's everything he's not. Young, bright, pleasant. On top of that, she is absolutely beautiful. Dangerous curves, big hazel eyes, and hair that curls perfectly around my fingers.

“Can't have her.” I shake my head in overdone, admittedly drunk, fashion. She's meant for some soft executive with a trust fund and family house in the Hamptons. I'm too filthy. My soul is black. Hers gleams white from any angle. The picture of perfect innocence, sweetness, and somehow sin. Because when I see her, my thoughts always turn to what I'd like to do to her. How many times I could make her come. How I could ruin her for that soft executive trust fund brat in her future. How I could make her crave me, and *only* me.

But it's not to be.

I see her every few months when I go in to see her boss. Her cheeks turn a cute pink as she leads me into his office, and her hips always have a tantalizing sway as she walks me to his thick double doors.

“Mr. Black,” she breathes. Eyes down, hair falling around her shoulders, cheeks an even brighter pink.

Would she address me as “Mr. Black” if I bent her over her desk and buried my face in her pussy from the back?

I lift my bottle in a toast. “I'll drink to that.”

My phone vibrates again and again.

I keep drinking.

Bernie keeps snoozing.

The sun sets.

Then it rises.

Sets again.

Then someone bangs on my door.

“Fuck.” I blink, trying to determine if I’m awake and this is hell. The pounding in my head promises me I’m still here, still breathing, still being a part-time drunk.

Bernie jumps off the bed and skitters toward the bathroom, his tail twitching.

I rise, close my eyes tight, and feel my way down the hall, past the expensive art I don’t understand and across the rug that cost more than most people’s cars.

When I get to the door, I pull the pistol I have strapped to the wall beside it and press the barrel to the wood.

“Who is it?” I call. But it’s more of a croak.

“Mr. Baines has been calling.”

I know that voice. I hate it. Todd. As if I didn’t have enough reasons to hate Mr. Baines’ sniveling son-in-law, his fucking name is another addition to the list.

“The fuck you want?” I consider pulling the trigger for shits and giggles.

“A situation has developed. Mr. Baines has a job for you. One that must be executed immediately.”

“I just got back.”

“Do you think that matters to him?” His voice rises to almost soprano levels.

My head pounds, and my trigger finger is itchy.

“I hope you haven’t forgotten your debt to—”

“Fine.” I press my forehead to the cool wall. “Name and info to my cell. I’ll get to work.”

“That’s better. And answer your phone when I call,” he snaps, then turns and heads for the elevator.

“Should’ve shot him,” I call to Bernie from his perch on the kitchen counter.

I stumble back to bed and lie there in the dark.

My cell buzzes again. I pick it up and ignore the missed calls.

I click on the message from Todd. It has one name on it. That's all.

The hangover seems to clear like a fog as I stare hard at my phone, disbelief settling in my brain like a buzzard on carrion.

Just one name.

Margaret.

MARGARET

I rub my eyes, trying not to fall asleep. I'm worn out from the long day at the office.

I had no idea working for Mr. Baines would be so demanding. I work from the second I get in till the second my head hits my pillow at home.

I spoon a mouthful of Fruity Pebbles into my mouth as I wait for the documents to load. A screen pops up giving me a message the file is locked.

I stare at it. Why is it locked? I tab back out and try again. The same thing happens. I told Mr. Baines I'd have all the files transferred over to the new service by the end of the day. It's already pushing nine pm, and I don't have much wiggle room if I want to get this done.

Mr. Baines is very demanding, and I don't think he'll be happy if this isn't complete by this evening. It's not as if I can call him to ask about it. What if he already told me the password and I'd forgotten? He'll think I'm incompetent, and I can't have that.

"Crap crap crap." I rub my eyes and debate what I should do next.

I can't lose this job. Mr. Baines is fast to fire people. Oftentimes, he doesn't even have a reason. I grab my cell phone and call my old college roommate. She has to have a suggestion on what to do.

“Hey, girlie,” she greets me. I smile, missing her. She was my first friend when I went away to college. It was tough when we both graduated, and she moved across the world. Half the time, I don’t even know her whereabouts. She travels so much with her job.

“Hey, Selena.” I let out a relieved sigh that she answered the phone.

She can be pretty hit or miss.

“Oh no. What did you do? I can tell from the tone of your voice that you did something.”

She’s right. I have a knack for stumbling into trouble. “I need help.”

“You got a virus again? I told you to stop downloading porn. You stream it.”

My face warms. She’s never going to let that one time go. “I was not looking up porn.”

“Sure you weren’t.”

“I swear. Last time I was just downloading pictures of kittens!”

“Pussy? Ah Mag Pies, you should have told me. You’ve been in the closet this whole time?” I hear her trying to fight a laugh.

I let out a giggle myself. No matter what is going on in my life or what catastrophe is happening, I know I can always count on her to help. To be honest, hearing her voice has already made me feel better. “All this time, and we could have been together.”

“You’re way too into my sex life.” Some things never change. “I’m also not your type.”

“What’s my type?”

“Victoria’s Secret model?” She always loved the tall girls. In college, Selena got more action than any man on campus. She’s a killer combination of gorgeous and smart.

“I’m a sucker for legs.”

I nod in agreement. Even if she can't see.

"What did you do?" I hear her hit a few keys. Then I see the cursor on my screen move. She's already in my system.

"I forgot the password to this file." I highlight it.

"Give me a second." I hear her clicking away as I wait. I shove another bite of cereal into my mouth.

"Are you still living off Fruity Pebbles? I thought you would have moved on to something more suitable at this point."

"Maybe. I like them, and I don't have to cook them. You know what happens when I try to cook," I say with a mouth full of them, making her laugh.

"All right. I think I got it for you."

"You did?" It's only a matter of seconds before all the files start to pop up.

"That one wasn't so easy."

"But you did it."

"Well, yeah. That's why the government pays me the big bucks."

We talk for a little, catching up on things until I see the time.

"Crap! I've got to go." How did two hours pass already? I'm going to be up all night. I don't do well on no sleep. I have no other choice, though. It's either finish or deal with the wrath of Mr. Baines.

"Call me later." She hangs up.

I start clicking through the files to transfer them over. I open the first one and stare at it. There's a list of names with dates next to some of them. I keep reading, trying to understand what this file has to do with the project I'm working on.

I only recognize one name, and that's only because he died last week. Before his death, he was a wanted man by the FBI. Nationwide manhunt. It had been all over the news. Why the heck would his name be on this list? Weird.

I don't recognize any of the other names. I should probably leave it. Transfer the files and be done, but my curiosity gets the better of me. I tab out and google a few of the names.

The ones with dates seem to be people that have died. What does that mean for the names without a date next to them? I swallow, thinking I know. I stare at the screen, not sure what I should do.

I scramble over to my bag and pull out a USB, then start downloading everything in this set of files. I've only opened one so far. Who knows what is on the others? When it's done, I shut my laptop and shove it into my bag.

"What do I do?" I stand in the middle of my tiny studio apartment. I wring my hands together, thinking about what I've discovered. Nerves settle in my stomach.

I can't be right about this. Mr. Baines has a hit list? Death list? Murder list? I don't know. It's a list with dead people! A chill runs down my spine, because I wouldn't put it past him. Everyone knows he can be ruthless, but I never imagined to what extent. What would happen if someone knew I saw this?

I grab my sweater and keys off the counter. I'll go to the police. Show them what I found. They can tell me I'm crazy or that I just solved dozens of murders. I lock my door behind me as I head for the stairs.

"My wallet!" I turn back to grab it. A hand comes down on my shoulder hard.

I scream in surprise, then turn and push whoever grabbed me. My eyes meet his as he starts to fall backwards. I try to grab him, but I'm too late. He goes tumbling down the stairs. A gun clatters next to him, sliding across the floor. When he rolls to a stop on the landing, he doesn't get up. I see blood start to rush from a gash on his head. Oh, crap. This isn't good.

Is he dead? Oh my God, he's dead. I killed him. I just killed a man.

I stand there in shock. My feet are unable to move.

I'm going to jail. I can't look away from the man as his blood oozes onto the gray tile.

A shadow falls over the man as someone steps into the stairway. My eyes meet no other than Mr. Black's. He's dressed in all black like always. It's fitting with his last name.

"It ... it was an accident," I stammer. "I don't um, I don't even know what just happened." I run a shaking hand across my face, oddly worried that Mr. Black will somehow think less of me. As if I committed a simple faux pas, not a murder.

He fills up the entire space around the person I just accidentally murdered. After giving me a once over with his gaze, he turns back to my unintended victim and toes him.

"Wait, did he move a little?" A thin wisp of foolish hope springs up inside me. "Maybe he's still alive? We should call 911. I'll go call 911." I start to turn and head back to my apartment.

Mr. Black bends down, picks up the gun, presses it to the back of the man's head, and pulls the trigger.

I do the only thing my body will let me do. I scream.

*H*er cry is gut wrenching as I take the steps two at a time and grab her. Slapping one hand over her mouth, I get behind her and drag her down the hall and into her apartment.

She struggles, but I only grip her tighter as I kick the door shut.

“Margaret.” I shake her a little.

She stops screaming against my palm. I pull her tight against me, her curves distracting me when I need to focus. But damn, she feels so good. The lavender scent I catch every so often when I walk past her in the office is stronger now. It must be her shampoo or something, because I press my nose into her hair and inhale it.

“Listen to me very carefully. People are coming to kill you. That man was a contract killer. There’s a hit out on you. I’m here to stop that from happening. When I release you, I want you to grab anything you need to survive. Prescriptions, those cute blue-rimmed glasses you wear sometimes, things like that. Leave your credit cards, your phone, and your purse. Do you understand? Nod your head if you do.”

It takes a few seconds, but eventually she inhales in a sharp breath through her nose and nods.

“Good. Go.” I release her and step back, even though the last thing I want to do is put distance between us.

She hurries down the hall but stops to turn and look at me, her eyes wide, her skin pale. “Why?”

It’s a good question, but one we don’t have time for. “Go. I’ll tell you when you’re safe.”

“Safe, right,” she whispers and disappears into her bedroom. “I killed a man. Or maybe he killed a man. There’s a dead man on the stairs. Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. But Mr. Black is here. He’s here, and he says he wants to keep me safe. This isn’t happening. Is this really happening?” She’s talking in a quiet, yet panicked, voice, but I can hear her moving around packing things.

I look around her apartment. It’s cute and adorable just like her. With one ear on any movement outside her door, I walk over and inspect her family photos. Parents, both of them smiling as she stands between them. The photo is older, and she looks so young and happy, her eyes still that same bright hazel that verges on gold. Then there’s a photo of her with a friend, both of them smiling with their college diplomas in hand. Next to it on the shelf is some sort of large, sparkly stuffed animal. It has a panda body with a horn on top and bears a “Fill-A-Friend by Layla” label. Like I said, cute.

Easing down the hall, I peek into her bedroom as she stuffs a linen bag with some clothes.

“We need to go.” I say it as gently as I can. “They’re coming.” I don’t tell her they’re coming because I didn’t answer my damn phone fast enough. Baines got antsy and called the Brotherhood, so now I’m dealing with multiple assassins trying to show me up and get this kill.

“Okay. I mean, *not okay*.” She looks toward the stairs as if she can see the hitman’s body through the wall. “That man. He’s dead. I killed him.”

“*I* killed him.” I take her arm and lead her toward her front door. “Not you.”

“Wait.” She rushes to the shelf and grabs the strange stuffed animal, tucking it under one arm. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“I need you to trust me. Can you do that?” I stop outside her front door.

“I-I ... Yes.” She gives me a hard nod.

“Good. Stick close to me. Don’t get separated. I will protect you.” I take her hand and use my other one to slowly open her door.

The hall is clear, so I pull her along with me, past the bloody stairwell where a small cadre of neighbors have gathered. Sirens blare in the distance as we hustle toward the back staircase that leads down to the parking garage.

I keep her hand in mine and pull my Glock with my other.

She gasps and shakes her head. “This isn’t real.”

With a quick movement, I peek over the railing to see if the stairway is clear. The slug that zooms past my head and embeds in the stair above me tells me it isn’t. Fuck.

Margaret jumps at the gunshot and squeezes my hand tight. “This *is* real.”

“Very,” I growl.

“Who’s up there?” a man calls, his accent coated in Boston. “I don’t want to shoot you, buddy. But this is my contract, and I can’t let you take it out from under me like this.”

“She’s dead. Contract’s already been fulfilled.”

“Ah, fuck.” He sighs heavily. “You sure?”

“I put a bullet between her eyes. I’m sure. Better luck next time.”

Margaret shakes her head, her gaze on my pistol. Does she think I’d hurt her? The thought is like a burr under my skin that I can’t handle.

With a soft tug, I pull her to me and press my lips to hers. Softly, gently, with all the warmth a coldhearted bastard like me can muster.

She’s stiff at first, but then she closes her eyes, her fear draining away as I show her the real reason I’m here. For her.

Always for her.

Footsteps sound on the stairs. “Well, if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to see the body. Make sure I missed out. This one time, a guy told me he’d killed the target and turns out he *was* the target! The target had killed a member of the Brotherhood. Can you imagine? So now I double check.”

I pull back, and her eyes flutter open, the golden irises even more beautiful up close. “I understand,” I call.

“Yeah, he tried to shoot me, but I knifed him real good.” The steps grow closer. “So maybe it was a good thing he killed the first guy since I’m the one who got the body bag bonus, am I right?”

“Right.” I lean over and glimpse his greasy hair a little way below us.

“Too bad you already got this one, though. I was hoping to have some fun with her before—”

My gunshot rings out loudly in the closed stairwell. The hitman gives me a surprised look from a flight down before he tumbles over the rail and lands with a crunch below. No one talks about my Margaret like that.

A shiver courses through her, but I grip her hand tighter and lead her down the stairs. I pause at each landing and listen. The sirens are here now, the cops looking at the dead hitman. There’s too much noise for me to listen for more threats. I don’t like it.

I hurry her down the last flight of stairs, shield her from the gore of the asshole I just popped, then ease through the door to the parking garage.

“Come on. Quickly.” I pull her along with me to my black SUV and help her into the passenger seat, then run around my side.

I start the engine right as a matte black Mustang screeches around the corner ahead.

Shit. “Don’t move.”

“What? Why aren’t we going?”

“Don’t. Move.” I let the engine idle as Xavier steps out of his car, checks his weapons, then trots to the stairwell we just exited.

He pauses before opening the door and glances around. His gaze lingers on my SUV for a moment, but from this angle in the dim garage, he can’t see through the driver’s side window. My heart rampages in its cage. I don’t want to kill Xavier, but I will if I have to.

After another quick glance, he yanks open the door and plunges into the stairwell.

I drag in a breath.

“He’s here to kill me?”

“Yes.” I hit the gas, roll out of the garage without fanfare, and hit the highway.

“Why?” Her voice cracks on the question, and I reach over and take her hand.

When I see tears rolling down her cheeks, a piece of me I’d thought was long dead fractures.

“Why would someone want t-t-to hurt me?” She sniffles.

“Mr. Baines—”

“What?” Her eyes widen.

“Let’s just get you to my place and then we can—” My words are cut off when we’re rammed from the back and sent careening off the interstate and into the median.

MARGARET

I scream and cover my face with my hands. The sound of metal crushing and glass breaking has me trying to push farther back in my seat. Not that there's anywhere I can go. I open two fingers to peek out, needing to see what's happening. I don't look for long before I'm screaming again and covering up. Mr. Black jerks the car to the right off the median. My stomach drops with the car.

"You okay?" I hear him ask. "Babe, are you okay?" he asks again.

"Am I okay?" I shout back. We murdered someone in my hallway, there's a hit out on me, and I'm currently in a high-speed chase with no end in sight. I want to yell these things at him, but I know now's not the best time.

"You're shouting, so I'll take that as a yes." He pushes down on the gas, speeding up even more. I look in the side mirror to see two cars coming up fast behind us. Wait. Did he call me babe? *Not the time*, I tell myself. But I could die in the next few minutes, so I allow myself a few seconds to enjoy him calling me that.

"That car is catching up." I'm sure he already knows, but I have to say it anyway. I feel helpless, and I need to contribute in some way. I watch as he pulls his big gun back out. Oh no. Not again.

I know I should be scared, worried, and all that other good stuff, but I can't help but stare at his side profile. I always thought he was gorgeous. Even though he was always so

serious when I saw him. But now I'm seeing him in an entirely different light. He helped me kill someone. All because he thought they were there to hurt me. That thought does something funny to me.

The black car races up beside us. My window is busted out. My eyes meet the other man's dark gaze as he starts to lift his gun, too. I scream, because that's all I think I can do.

"Sit back," I hear Mr. Black order me. I don't exactly listen. Instead I kinda sorta panic and throw my pandacorn as hard as I can out the window. It hits the bad guy right in the face. He swerves to the right. The black SUV behind him runs into the back of his car. It tries to turn, screeching sideways. A semi comes and hits it dead on. I watch in shock as everything seems to happen in slow motion.

The other car is still drifting to the right with the driver trying to get control of his car. "Oh, God." I cover my mouth with my hands so I don't scream again as the other attacker runs into a giant concrete divider before rolling off down the hill. I turn back to look, but all I see is smoke.

"He might be okay, right?" I swallow hard. "He could survive that sort of—" A loud boom cuts off my words, and I turn toward the sound. Fire and smoke shoot up from where the car went down the hill. Okay, maybe he's not doing so well after all. I turn back in my seat. I can feel Mr. Black looking over at me.

"Sorry?" I cringe when I finally break and return his glances. "I think I killed them." The dismay in my voice can't be missed.

He checks the rearview. "They might be alive."

I don't believe him. He's trying to make me feel better. I shouldn't care, because they tried to kill me first. Mr. Black keeps racing down the highway. I still can't believe this is happening. How is this my life?

Mr. Black cuts across four lanes and exits off the highway before turning into what looks like an industrial area.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask.

“To my place and then a safe house.” He turns again into an alleyway. I scream, thinking it’s too narrow, but he fits in it, just barely. He comes to a halt outside of a building. “I need you to stay put. You hear me?”

I nod. He places the gun in my lap. I push it off and it falls to the floorboard. He reaches down and picks it back up. “Safety is off. Anyone comes near the car, you don’t hesitate. You pull the trigger until the hammer clicks on empty. Lights out.”

I don’t want to make anyone’s lights go out.

He reaches over and squeezes my hand. “I need to hear you say you’ll stay put, babe.”

“I’ll stay put.” What other option do I have? He’s keeping me alive.

He gives me a long look before he starts to get out of the car. Then he stops and turns back to me. His hands come to my face, cupping it as he pulls me in for another kiss. It’s soft like the last one. I didn’t think anything about Mr. Black could ever be soft. It’s over as quick as the last one, then he gets out of the car running inside. My fingers graze across my lips where he’d just kissed me.

Then I come back down from the clouds and stare at the gun I’m holding. It’s heavier than it looks. I turn it and look at it from all angles. The only gun I’ve ever seen close up is a Nerf gun. I jerk my head up when I hear glass shatter from above somewhere. A second later, something hits the ground in front of the car.

“No.” I shake my head. That is not what I think it is. I scream and lift the gun when the driver’s door opens.

“It’s me.” Mr. Black steals it from my hands before I even know what he’s doing. It’s kinda cool. I wonder if he’ll teach me all of these skills he has. He sets a crate between us.

“Did you throw someone out a window?” He starts the car before pulling away. I ignore the loud thump as I try not to think about what we just ran over.

“Maybe.” At least he doesn’t lie about it. He gets back on the highway. I wrap my arms around myself. The cold air blowing

through the window chills me. Or it could be that everything is finally catching up to me.

“Here.” Mr. Black reaches into the back seat and pulls out a giant coat to hand to me.

“Thanks.” I put it over me like a blanket. “Can you tell me what’s happening now?”

“Let’s wait until we’re somewhere safe.”

I rest my head back. A giant yawn comes from me. I felt so awake a few minutes ago. Now it’s getting hard to keep my eyes open.

“You can sleep,” he tells me. I shake my head. Maybe I should, but what if this is all a dream? I mean, I wouldn’t mind if the whole murdering and being chased thing were. But the part of Mr. Black saving me, whisking me away to an undisclosed location, and most of all kissing me, have me never wanting to wake up.

“How can I sleep right now?”

“Your adrenaline is crashing. It’s normal to feel tired.”

“Oh,” I say with another yawn.

“You’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I look over at him. Soft kisses and sweet words. The man is nothing like I thought he would be.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do. You saved my life. You could have died.” He’s a real-life hero. I didn’t think those existed, but here he is right in front of me.

He pulls off the highway. “Margaret.”

“I liked it better when you called me babe.” I put my hand over my mouth again. Why did I say that?

“Babe,” he starts again.

“*Meow.*”

I look at the crate.

“Is that a cat?” I bend down to try and look inside.

“That’s Bernie. Why we had to stop at my place.”

I smile, looking over at Mr. Black. “We went to get your cat. That’s so stinkin’ adorable.”

“Adorable?”

“That’s what I said.” I bend down again to look at the kitty. He’s a big boy. “Hi, Bernie. I’m Margaret.” He meows again. “I think he likes me.”

“You’re hard not to like.”

My cheeks go warm. Good thing he can’t see me too well right now.

We hit a gravel road. When I glance around, all I see is darkness. It looks like we’re in the middle of nowhere.

“You didn’t save me to only kill me, did you, Mr. Black?”

He doesn’t say anything for a second.

“Call me Jacob.” The car rolls to a stop in front of a rustic little cabin.

“Where are we, Jacob?” I don’t know how long we were driving.

“For now, it’s home.”

“So we live together? This is moving really fast. First we get a pet. Now we’re moving in together.” He doesn’t say anything.

“It was a joke. You’re supposed to laugh.”

“I don’t laugh.”

I smile. “Challenge accepted.”

“*B*ernie, come on.” I grab his cage and carry him into the cabin.

“This is ... beautiful.” She steps from the SUV as I return to her.

“This land goes way back in my family.”

“We used to live near a lake when I was a little girl.” Her eyes wander across the dark water beyond the grassy slope to our right.

“This one’s full of crappie, snapping turtles, and alligators if you believe the tales of my grandfather.” I shake my head. “But don’t worry. Ownership is hidden through a maze of shell corporations. No one knows about this place anymore.”

“So we’re out here. All alone?” She yawns as an owl flies overhead and lets out a warbling series of hoots.

“It’s safe.” I take her tote bag and offer her my arm. What I want to do is sweep her off her feet and carry her into the cabin, but I’m trying to be gentle. As gentle as a man like me can be. After all, this is *my* world, not hers. The violence and the blood—my domain. A woman like her should never have to deal with this mess.

“I think I killed those guys with a pandacorn.” She looks up at me, her eyes tired but still bright.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think there was a note of pride in her voice.

“I mean, I didn’t *want* to kill them,” she says as I guide her onto the pine porch and into the cabin. “I was just trying to get them to go away.” Her face falls. “But I loved that pandacorn. Sad to see it go.”

Her sadness burrows under my skin. I have to fix that, to keep her just as bright as she always is.

I set her bag down next to the bed along the back wall, then help her to it and sit her down. “I’m going to make a fire.”

She pulls my coat around her tighter, and more than a little satisfaction courses through me that she’s getting my scent all over her.

“Bernie.” I drop to my haunches and open his crate. “Be nice. I’m lighting a fire then setting up your litter. But if you put so much as a scratch on—”

He struts past me, a purr already starting in his throat as he rubs his gray tabby body against Margaret’s leg.

She reaches down. “Hello, Bernie. Very nice to meet you.”

He sniffs her fingers for only a second, then rubs his chin on them, inviting her to scratch him. She obliges, his purr intensifies, and I stand and stare at them. He’s never even gone near anyone else, much less thrown himself at someone. When I got him from the pound, he was alone in a cage, his ears down, eyes wild, hissing so loud it sounded like a gas leak. No one there dared go near him. I chose him immediately. And at my place? I rarely had guests, but when I did, he’d make himself scarce. But now, he was whoring himself out to Margaret, prancing and turning as if he was in love.

“What?” She looks up at me, those hazel eyes a deeper gold in the dim light.

“Nothing.” A feeling creeps through. Something warm. Something I can’t recall ever sensing before.

I back away and head out the door to the woodshed around the side. The top has held since last winter, the wood dry as I pick up some sticks of kindling. Pausing, I pull out my burner phone and see if I can get a signal. No dice. Good. I don’t

want us traced at all. Though the phone's a burner for emergencies, I don't want it sending out any kind of signal.

Loading the wood into my arms, I toe the front door open again and shut it against the wind with my backside. I set it neatly beside an old potbelly stove, then open the front grate, arrange the kindling and a few logs, and start the fire.

"You're such a good boy," Margaret coos as she lies on her side and Bernie rubs against her.

I watch them as the fire begins to crackle along the kindling resin, the scent of pine smoke telling me it's going. I close the front door but leave the grate open so the flue can send out the smoke.

The lights flicker as I stand.

She stops petting Bernie and looks at me with a hint of alarm.

"Normal," I say. "The power comes from the highway pretty far out, and the line is old and buried, so it'll get water in it or a varmint chewing on it from time to time, but it's fine. Just enough juice for some lights and a fridge."

"Okay." She folds her arm beneath her head and resumes petting Bernie. He flops beside her on the mattress and offers his tummy. The little slut. Something in my face twitches around my mouth. An odd sensation. Unfamiliar.

I turn away before it happens again. Not to mention the sight of her on that bed, the way my coat drapes over her curves, the way her fingers are stroking Bernie. Am I jealous of a cat? Yeah. I am. I want those fingers on *me*, touching *me*—okay, maybe not on my belly, but nearby.

I scrub a hand down my face. "Bathroom is there. It's small but it's got all we need. Kitchen here." I point.

She yawns, her eyes closing. "I have questions."

"Ask." I sit in one of the chairs around the dining table, finally giving myself a moment to relax. I'll set up traps in the morning, catch wind of anyone coming on the property and take them out before they get to the cabin. I also need to set up some weirs in the creek that runs a few hundred yards away,

its waters feeding the lake. I can also do some rabbit traps. I've got equipment for all of that. Margaret won't go hungry. I'll feed her the choicest bits of whatever I catch. No matter how long we stay here, I can keep her healthy and warm, fed and safe.

What else? I scratch my chin. I've got hunting rifles for deer, and I can forage plenty from the woods and the little food plots I've planted here and there with fresh vegetables. It's coming on winter but not quite frigid, so there should be plenty available.

I realize that Margaret never asked her questions, so I turn to her. What I find is an angel, her lashes like dark lace on her cheeks and her breathing soft and low. Bernie is cuddled in her arms, his arms splayed as he slumbers peacefully.

That strange sensation snakes through my chest again. I rub at the skin over my heart. Maybe I'd wanted Margaret before, fantasized about her, stroked off to her more times than I could count. But looking at her now, I realize those feelings have intensified, strengthened from the moment I decided to save her instead of taking her life.

I made the right choice. I have no doubt about that. But the repercussions from the deal I broke with Baines may make my life a living hell when this is over. It's a risk I have to take.

Pulling a quilt from the small chest at the foot of the bed, I unroll it on the threadbare rug and settle down. One eye on Margaret and another on the door, my gun right beside me just in case.

Now that I have her, no one will hurt her. Even if I have to die to make that happen. I rub my chest again as I look at her, follow the curves of her lips, the shape of her body under my coat. I already know, no matter what, the sacrifice is worth it.

MARGARET

I snuggle down deeper into my blanket, trying to get comfortable. I don't remember my bed being this hard. It only takes me a few minutes before everything comes rushing back.

I'm not home.

I murdered people with a pandacorn.

There's a hit out on my life.

That about sums up the events from earlier. Oh, there is one last thing: I'm currently at Mr. Black's place. And I don't know if I'll ever get to go home again. I'm not sure anyone will miss me, either.

If it's my boss who's after me, he'll tell everyone I quit or was fired. It'll take my parents forever to realize something is wrong. We haven't talked in ages. They're currently on another one of their cruises around the world. I never hear from them.

Nope. No one will know I'm missing. Except Barney when he comes to collect rent. It's really sad when I think about how few people I have in my life. It's way too easy to erase my existence without anyone knowing any better. I swallow the lump that starts to form in my throat. Something brushes across my face. What the heck is that? Another fluttery feeling happens a second later.

"Spider!" I scream and jump out of the bed. The lights flick on. Mr. Black is on his feet. His gun pointed at the door.

“There’s a spider!” I run over to him. It could be on the ground now. I jump, and Mr. Black catches me. “I don’t think you can kill a spider with a gun,” I inform him as I turn my head to look back at the bed.

The cat sits in the middle of the mattress, his tail flicking back and forth. He really is so stinkin’ cute.

“Are you okay?” Mr. Black’s voice comes out rougher than normal as he lowers his gun.

“I think it might have been Bernie’s tail and not a spider.” I cringe at my overreaction. “You should double check to be sure.”

He doesn’t. Instead, he drops into the chair behind him with me still clinging to him. My knees spread around his hard thighs, and I straddle him as he settles. Even though I know the immediate danger is over, I don’t even try to loosen my hold on him. Being in his arms gives me a certain comfort that I wasn’t aware I needed.

“You scared the shit out of me.” He places the gun on the rough-hewn table beside him and cups my face with his big hands as he inspects me. I can’t place the look that’s in his eyes, but it’s gone before I can delve any deeper into it.

“You don’t look like someone who scares easily.” I lick my lips.

He’s so close again. “I’m not.” His thumb drifts across my bottom lip.

I can’t help but lick it again. My tongue brushes against his thumb.

His eyes flick up to mine. “Margaret.”

“That’s me.”

“I know.” He drops his hands away. Disappointment hits me. I thought he was going to kiss me again. I know the first time was to get me to be quiet. I’m not so sure what the second one was for. Maybe another way to calm me down?

I guess I do go quiet when he kisses me. I think I go into a bit of shock every time those gorgeous lips meet mine. Quiet is

not something I usually am. Except at work when I have to hold it back so I don't annoy Mr. Baines. Which is easy to do. Maybe that's why he's trying to murder me. My dad always said my mouth was going to get me in trouble one day.

This whole thing is even more mystifying, because I could never picture Mr. Black kissing anyone. He doesn't look like the type that does sweet kisses and cuddles.

He doesn't say anything else, just keeps staring at me. I shift on top of him, trying to get more comfortable. Or maybe I'm supposed to get off. I freeze when I see his expression change. He looks pissed. His hands grab my hips.

"I'm sorry I screamed."

"Margaret." He growls my name. His fingers dig into my hips more.

"I really am sorry. I'm scared of spiders. All bugs really. They crawl all around and you can't find them. It creeps me out. I heard that you swallow like seven spiders a year! Seven. I try to sleep with my mouth closed. Was it closed when I was sleeping? I can't see myself when I'm sleeping so I'm not sure if I open it after I fall asleep. I guess I can't really control it. Still I don't want to eat spiders. What if-" His mouth comes down onto mine.

I relax into him as he kisses me again. My eyes fall closed. His tongue traces the seam of my mouth. I part my lips for him, letting him in. His kiss is slow and sweet. Tentatively, I try to kiss him back. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know if I don't kiss him back I'll regret it.

A throb between my legs kicks up, and I try to squeeze my thighs together to stifle the growing heat. He growls into my mouth when I do it. Then my hips rock just the slightest bit. Another groan, and his hand pins me in place so I can't do it anymore. Have I gone too far? I pull back from the kiss and look down, unable to meet his eyes.

"Sorry," I say again.

"Stop apologizing."

“Sorry.” I jerk my head back up. “I didn’t mean to say it again. It’s a habit. It’s proper manners. My mom always told me that-”

“Do you always talk this much? I don’t remember that. You’re always so quiet in the office.”

I bite my bottom lip so I don’t say sorry for the tenth time. Instead, I just shrug. Yes, I talk this much. It drove my parents crazy growing up. It gets worse when a situation is awkward. Then I can never shut up. Unless Mr. Black kisses me. That sure seems to work.

I try to scoot back, but again get nowhere. I shift, sucking in a breath when I realize exactly what my sex is pressed up against. *Do not say sorry.* I repeat on a loop in my head.

“I need to use the bathroom.” It’s the only thing I can come up with so I can get out of here for a minute. I need to get myself together so I don’t start babbling on more and annoy him. He releases my hips. I try to jump up but fall over. He grabs me before I hit the floor and puts me back on my feet.

“Thanks.” I dart to the bathroom and close the door behind me. I put my face in my hands. I can’t go back out there. Gah. What is wrong with me? I was dry-humping him, and he was only trying to kiss me so I’d shut up.

I go over to the sink, turn the water on, and splash it on my face. I’m not sure if that will get it to cool down so I’m not blushing like a maniac. I grab the towel and wipe myself dry. I suddenly feel exhausted again. It’s still night out. I pull open the door to see Mr. Black standing next to the bed.

“No spiders.”

“Thanks.” I climb back into bed. He puts the blanket over me before heading to flip off the light. The room goes black. I hear him sit back down in the chair. “It’s a big bed. We can share. I’m sure the chair isn’t comfortable.” I scoot all the way over and sigh. “I sure miss Wally.”

“Wally?” His voice turns darker.

“My pandacorn.” I haven’t even shed a tear for him. What kind of person am I?

“Oh.” His tone lightens. “The stuffed animal.”

“His name was Wally. He was the best pandacorn ever made.” I sniffle a little and scoot closer to the wall. “You can fit in the bed. It’s big enough.”

“You think it’s a big bed because you’re tiny. I’m a big man.”

“As you said, I’m tiny. We should both fit.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” His voice has gone deep again.

“Okay. I feel guilty with you sleeping in the chair or on the floor. I’m going to leave this spot open if you change your mind.” I roll over and face the wall. I humped him and then invited him to bed. I need to start thinking before I talk like Mom always said.

My breath hitches as Mr. Black stands. I can feel him behind me, his gaze on my back. When he moves closer, I can’t seem to breathe. Then he lies down next to me. I can feel the heat of his body. For the first time in my life, the need to talk doesn’t seem important. I’m more than happy to be silent if it means he’ll stay here with me.

JACOB

She's out. Gone to dreamland. Bernie is nestled on top of her pillow, his little snores unmistakable.

This bed is small. We're touching. The entire side of my body is against her back. If I moved my hand an inch to the left, I'd be pressing against the curve of her ass.

My cock misbehaves at the thought of touching her. Of course it does. I don't know what came over me when I got into this bed with her. Maybe it was the way she asked, the faint undercurrent of fear in her voice. Either afraid of the spider or the very real killers who are out there searching for her even now.

I grit my teeth. Not a single one of them will hurt her. I'll die to protect her, though I don't know why. I try to close my eyes, to sleep.

I can't. Not when she's so close. Not when I can feel every one of her breaths. When her scent is in my nose, her body heat pulsing through the blanket and into me, her every movement like a lightning rod for my attention. I'm caught up in her. My job, my home, my future—all of it gone in a blink because of her. But I don't regret it.

Moving slowly, I shift so I'm lying on my side. Careful to keep my hips away from her, I adjust my position so I don't fall off the bed. My chest is barely touching her back, and I can sleep like this. I shouldn't be in this bed, but I can't resist her. Does she have any idea what she does to me?

Bernie's tail flicks in my face, and I glance up at him. His eyes glow back at me, then he closes them and goes back to sleep. Contented little shit. My mouth does that thing again, the twitching at the edges.

I force myself to breathe deeply and try to sleep. A light slumber, one that I can wake from in an instant if someone shows up at my place. She makes a little noise in her throat, as if she's having a particularly sweet dream. My cock fights a war with my zipper.

A quiet sigh works its way from my lungs.

This is going to be a long night.



“Mr. Black.” A soft voice, one coated in sweetness and surprise, greets my ears.

I'm in a dream. One where Margaret is beneath me, my cock deep in her tight cunt as I fill her innocent body with my cock. Will she beg for my seed? I groan at the thought and push harder, wanting to connect us in the deepest way possible. It feels good, but not good enough. Her body is so warm, her skin delicious on my tongue. I want to come inside her, my squeaky clean woman taking every bit of my filthy cum.

I grunt and use my teeth on her neck, holding her in place like an animal as we pant together.

“Mr. Black?” Her voice is breathier now, and I feel her hands on my back, pulling me closer.

Pistoning harder, I want to embed myself to the fucking hilt.

“Mr. Bla-ooooohhhh.” She moans loud and low.

My eyes snap open.

Margaret is beneath me, her eyes closed, body arched, legs spread as she trembles and moans, lost in pleasure.

I was dreaming. But not. Because she's here, my bite mark on her neck along with what are going to be some highly visible

hickey. How long have I been doing this to her? I would worry about it, but I'm caught up in the way she comes, her hands clutching me close as her chin juts up, tension running through her until it abates. Her lower back meets the bed, her chin dropping and her eyes opening.

We stare at each other for a while. I need to explain. To ask for forgiveness. To say I'd never intended to do this. But would all that be true? Now that I'm between her thighs, my rock hard cock against her hot sex, I can't deny I've always wanted to be here. Just like this. With my marks on her body and my cock giving her a mind-numbing orgasm. If I said I was sorry, I'd be lying, and I never want to lie to Margaret.

When she rolls her hips against me subtly, I think I might lose my mind. Might back off her, rip her pajama pants off right along with her panties, and bury my face between her legs. Then fuck her until she can't come anymore without risking a sprained cunt.

"Mr. Black?" She blinks.

I clear my throat. "Mornin'." I back off to my knees.

A shadow of disappointment crosses her face.

"I didn't mean to ..." I run a hand through my hair. "You see, what happened ..." How do I even say it? "Look." I swipe a hand through the air.

She seems to be fighting a smile.

"Here's the thing, you see. I didn't plan on dry humping you this morning." It's mostly true, after all. I wanted to worship her pussy with my tongue and impale her on my dick until she screamed my name.

"Oh." Her face falls a little.

"Not that I don't want to," I add hastily.

"Oh." This 'oh' sounds more hopeful.

"I mean, of course I want to. Just look at you." I take her in—pink cheeks, bright eyes, the swell of her breasts beneath her Wonder Woman pajama top—and lick my lips.

She blushes even deeper.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, that if that was unwanted, I’m sorry. I’d never want to scare you or take anything that you didn’t offer. But I’m not sorry for making you come.”

Her gaze slides down my body, then stops below my waist.

Fuck, I’m probably scaring her. I step off the bed, turn away, and adjust myself. My cock is still hard, and I don’t think I’m going to be able to do much about it. Not when I’m still wondering what her cunt tastes like and how hard it would squeeze me if I were inside when she came. A groan tries to leave my throat, but I bite it back.

“I’m not scared.” Her soft voice is a balm on my spirit.

I shake my head. She’s too good for the likes of me. Too innocent to be anywhere near this life. Once I straighten out this trouble with Baines, she should get as far away from me as possible.

She puts a hand on my back. “Really, Mr. Black. I’m not scared. Not of you, anyway.”

“You should be.” I reach for the gun by the bed, then drop down to rummage through the supply chest against the back wall.

“Why?” She sits up, her gaze boring into my back. “You saved me. You said Baines is trying to kill me.”

“He is. You know too much. Something about you breaking into some files that he was trying to offload.”

“That’s why he wants me dead?”

“Yes, and Baines is particularly good at getting what he wants.” I load up a weathered leather bag with bait and tools to make traps.

“But you work for him, so why did you come to help me?”

I stop, my hands freezing in their task.

“How did you know?”

I want to lie to her so badly my mouth burns. But I can't. So I don't. I grab the rest of my supplies. "All you need to know is I'm no good." I turn and meet her gaze. "I'm a bad man, babe. Not meant for a woman like you."

Pain streaks across her face like a comet, and my heart seems to constrict. I have to get out of here before I fall at her feet and tell her everything she's bringing alive inside me.

"Stay put." I stalk to the door. "You're safe. I'll be back in a few hours."

"Where are you going?" She stands, her eyes widening. "Please don't leave me."

"You're safe," I repeat, then grab the rifle and step out onto the porch. Too chicken to look in her eyes and see that pain again. Too much of a fool to walk back in and give her answers. I hurt her. I know it.

My eyes focus on the waiting woods where I can find game and provisions for our stay, but then my thoughts stray to the SUV in its brush-covered hiding place. I know what I have to do.

With purposeful strides, I head toward the car. I can make this right.

MARGARET

*M*y emotions get the best of me. I burst into tears. I fall on the bed and pull the blanket over my head so I can have a good cry. It wasn't only because he left me. That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

I keep crying, happy that he's at least not around to see me be a blubbering mess. Everything is finally sinking in. All the unbelievable events of the past 24 hours.

I can feel Bernie trying to paw his way under the blanket with me. I pull it down some. He darts up toward my head and cuddles in closer to me. He lets out a low meow.

"I'm fine." I pet him. I sniff, trying to get myself to stop crying. It's upsetting Bernie.

"I'm all better." I turn and give him a kiss on the top of his head. I close my eyes and try to relax. Try to forget the fact that I'm out in the middle of nowhere alone. I nod off for a minute, but Bernie's loud purring wakes me up. Between the snoring and the purrs, I'm not too sure he's the best companion to share a bed with. Not that I'd ever tell him that. His cuteness more than makes up for it.

"Is he always this way, Bernie? I'm thinking you know him better than anyone."

He keeps rubbing his head against me. Mr. Black runs so hot and cold. One second I think he wants me and the next he can't get far enough away from me. My mom always told me not to let a man tell you twice that he doesn't want you. He

hasn't outright said it, but some of his actions are saying it for him.

I let out a long sigh, feeling a little bit better. A good cry always does that for me. Well, somewhat better. My life is crap. I can't even call it my life anymore. That 'me' doesn't exist anymore. I sit up and throw my legs over the side of the bed. I stretch as I stand up and look around the cabin. This place is really cute. It might be romantic if I weren't on the run from someone trying to kill me.

I walk over to the window and peek out. The sun is high in the sky. It looks beautiful. "Do you think I can sit on the porch, Berns?" He stares at me, not saying anything. "Are you ignoring me now? I gave you a nickname. That makes us like best friends." I don't know if that's true, but it sounds good. He jumps off the bed to rub himself on my legs while purring loudly. I'm guessing it's his way of accepting my friendship.

All this talk about friendship has me thinking about Selena. Will I ever speak to her again? Is she in danger because she helped me break into the file? Could they even trace that back to her? Crap.

"You know what? You just gave me an idea, Berns. When Mr. Black gets back ..." I trail off. He'll come back. He wouldn't leave me. Not after all he's done. His cat is here, too. No man would choose to walk this world without his cat by his side. I clear my throat and start again. "When he gets back here I'm going to give him the silent treatment." Berns lets out another meow, clearly agreeing with my plan.

Before I can spring into silent action, I need to clean myself up. I snag my bag and take it into the bathroom with me.

I flick the light on and meet my reflection in the mirror. Well, that solves the mystery of why he ran out of here so fast. I step closer to the mirror to look at my mess of hair. I hope I have a brush or hair tie in my bag. My eyes drift lower.

"Oh my." I pull my shirt down to see all the marks on my neck. I trail my finger over the spot where he bit me. I think it's going to bruise. Not that it takes much for me. I bruise like a peach. It doesn't hurt. In fact, it's part of the reason why I

orgasmed so hard. The thought of him leaving his mark on me had pushed me over.

I feel my nipples tighten under my shirt thinking about that. When I'd felt his hand drift across my stomach this morning, I'd pushed myself back into him. His cock pressed right up against my backside. I wasn't sure if he was sleeping or looking for a cuddle, so I lay there enjoying being close to him. For so long I've had a crush on him. I would often fantasize about him, but nothing can come close to the real thing.

He never looked at me twice when I was in the office. I wonder if it has to do with my talking too much. I know a few of the staff think I'm annoying. That's what I've overheard a few times. Gwen in accounting said it right to my face. I didn't tell her that she had lipstick on her teeth. It might have only been for a few minutes—because I felt guilty and went back and told her—but for two glorious minutes, I was a real bitch.

I bend down and dig through my bag. I find a brush, my Invisalign, my toothbrush for after lunch at work, and lip gloss. That's a pretty good score. A lot of what I shoved inside my bag was a blur. I feel deeper, past a few clothes, and then my fingers trace along something small and hard. I grimace and pull my hand away. The thumb drive with all of Mr. Baines's dirty laundry. I'd grabbed it in my rush.

Pushing the fear down, I withdraw my hand and take a few breaths, then use the bathroom before brushing my teeth and hair. I add the lip gloss, because why not? I put everything on the sink. I might as well make myself comfortable in this place.

I dig out a pair of pants and my pink Cookie Monster shirt. I guess I'll have to go with the cutesy look, though I doubt Mr. Black is going to find this attractive. It doesn't exactly scream sexy. I roll my eyes at myself. There's only me to blame. I'm the one that clicked the button on Amazon. In my defense, I didn't exactly have time to coordinate outfits last night.

I pull the pants on and then the shirt. I look at myself in the mirror. These cookies aren't going to bring any boys to my

yard. I grab the corner and tie it up. It shows off a little of my belly. I bend forward and back, looking in the mirror. This is when I'd usually call Selena and ask her if I could pull this off. I poke my squishy stomach.

He left hickeys all over me. He thinks I'm cute. Right? But does he think I'm sexy?

"Forget it." I flick the light off and leave the bathroom so I don't keep looking at myself in the mirror. A few more seconds, and I would have duck-faced. Can't have that. Bernie sits on the bed flicking his tail back and forth, watching me.

I look around the cabin. If we're going to be staying here, I could do a little clean up. I start with the bed before I move a few things around to straighten the place up. I don't have much to work with. I grab two tall glasses from the cupboard.

"Come on, Bernie." I head to the front door.

No one knows we're out here. I peek through the window and take a look around. Trees, trees, and more trees. Seems clear, so I open the door and step out onto the porch. The wind blows gently. It's a really nice day out. That's saying a lot, because I don't like the outside ninety percent of the time. I walk over to where I see flowers. Bernie sits on the porch watching me, his tail flipping back and forth.

I fill both cups with purple and yellow flowers. I take them back inside and place one on the small table and one by the sink. It's not much, but it's a little something to brighten up the place.

"Margaret." I jump and let out a scream.

Mr. Black is standing in the door with his eyes trained on me. I can't read his expression.

"You scared the crap out of me." I gulp.

"Why is the door open?" He takes a step inside.

"Doors open and close. That's what they're made to do."

"Margaret." He says my name again. Then he takes another step closer and kicks the door closed behind him.

Oh, *he's* mad? He mauls me like a sexy beast and gives me the greatest pleasure I've ever had and then runs out of here leaving me in a complete mess. And *he's* the one that's mad?

I don't think so.

"Don't you 'Margaret' me!" I fold my arms over my chest and walk over to the chair. I sit down hard. "I'm not talking to you." I wink at Bernie. He already knows I can't go more than a few minutes without talking.

Mr. Black continues to stare at me. He's probably not sure of what to make of my outburst. I hold my ground, though. Well, for as long as it takes for me to look him over. I run my eyes all over his thick body. I'm so preoccupied with all the goodness I'm seeing that I almost miss the fact he's holding something that belongs to me.

JACOB

“Wally!” Margaret dashes to me and takes the proffered stuffed animal from my hands. She hugs it tight, then holds it out. “You’re a little sooty and singed, but it’s still you.” She hugs it again. “I can replace that eye. Don’t worry,” she whispers.

I’d spent a while in the car with a bottle of water trying to get the blood out of its fur. I guess it worked, because she hasn’t mentioned it.

Turning to me, her eyes are watering as she says, “You went back for Wally.”

I shrug. “I’m not so good with talking. I spend most of my time alone, and I don’t make a habit of speaking to people. So what I said earlier, I—”

She jumps into my arms, taking me by surprise. “You went back for Wally!” She hugs my neck as I wrap my arms around her back. “Thank you.” Her warm breath tickles my ear and sends shockwaves of desire through me.

“It was nothing.”

“It was everything.” She squeezes me tighter.

I splay my hands across her back, feeling every breath she takes and each curve of her body. Her breasts are pressed against me, and I want to know if the tips are hard, wanting. Then her stomach growls.

I set her gently on her feet. “I have to go again, but this time I’ll be hunting and setting traps. Can you stay here and—”

“Teach me?” She still has Wally under one arm as she looks up at me with an expression that’s ... I can’t place it. It verges on ... admiration? But that can’t be right. A woman like her could never feel that toward a man like me. I’m the dirt beneath her feet.

“Teach you how to hunt?”

“Yeah.” She puts Wally on the bed beside an apprehensive Bernie. “I want to talk to you anyway. I still don’t fully understand what’s going on or the plan.” She grabs her bag and digs around until she pulls out some gray sneakers and slips them on. “And I don’t want to be here alone—” She scratches Bernie under the chin. “No offense. So can I come?” She hops back to her feet, bouncing a little.

“I’m not sure.” I take her in, all of her. From the Cookie Monster T-shirt to the skin-tight leggings. What I wouldn’t give to rip a hole in those and eat her sweet nectar while she moaned.

“Come on. I can help!” She grips my forearm.

I can’t say no to her. I was a fool to think that was even an option.

“You can come.” I move past her to the trunk and pull out a thick canvas coat and some mud boots. “But you need to dress safely. There are all sorts of snakes and thorns out there.” I glance at her shoes. “You can put these on over your sneakers.” I hold the boot out for her.

“I feel like Cinderella.” She slides one foot in, then dons the other boot as well. “And they fit! I guess that means you’re my prince.”

I look up at her sweet expression, the little dimple that shadows her cheek. If she knew who I really was, she wouldn’t say those things. I tried to tell her, to explain I’m bad news. But I botched it. Maybe that was on purpose. Maybe—even though I know I shouldn’t—I want her enough to dirty her up a little. After all, we’ve already killed together.

“What?” She reaches down and strokes my stubbled cheek.

“Hm?” I stand and help her to her feet.

“You were just looking at me like ...”

“Like what?” I slide the too-big jacket on over her T-shirt, then grab a piece of rope from the trunk and cinch it tight.

“I don’t know. And that’s the thing, isn’t it? I didn’t know Mr. Baines was so bad. I had no idea I was working for a killer. I mean, he had this list, you know? A list full of names.” I collect the rest of the supplies from the back of my SUV as she follows and continues, “And I recognized some of them. I’m pretty sure there were a couple of dead politicians on there. One was that guy from Texas. The one who got caught with his pe—” She pulls up short, and when I turn to her, her cheeks are red. “You know the guy who put his um, his thing in the hole and got busted.”

“Glory Hole Gary?” I smirk as I shoulder the rifle, then offer her my free arm.

She takes it and we start off toward the creek. “Yeah, that’s him! He died in some sort of boating accident, right?”

He died with my bullet between his eyes, but there’s no need to fill her in on that fine point. After all, I want her to keep talking. Something about her voice soothes me like nothing I’ve ever felt. And the quick way her mind works—I want to hear her thoughts on anything and everything. So, instead of revealing the facts, I let her put it all together herself. “A boating accident. That’s what the news said, yeah.”

“Okay, but what if it wasn’t an accident, Mr. Black?”

“Jacob.” I stop and turn to her. “Always call me Jacob, babe.”

She smiles, and I go warm all over again. How much will be left of me when she’s done melting through all my walls?

“Babe,” she whispers as we keep trudging down the leafy hollow to the creek. “Anyway, so what if Mr. Baines is like, I don’t know, in charge of some sort of murder ring? He runs the legitimate businesses, the ones I worked for. But he *also* does bad stuff? Right? That’s the only thing that makes sense. And when he discovered that I’d seen the bad stuff, that’s when he decided to have me killed. What do you think?”

“Seems like the math adds up.” I help her over a boulder and lead her to the water where the trees hang over and the creek enters the lake.

When I drop to my haunches, she follows suit.

“What are we doing?” She peers at the worn leather bag as I open it.

“Since I lost some daylight by going on that errand—which I *wanted* to do,” I add quickly so she doesn’t think I meant it any other way, “I figured I’d set up some weirs to catch fish. That way I’ll have more time to set up small game traps, then hunt for deer once the sun begins to set.”

“You hunt for deer in the dark?” She watches as I set up the fish trap using the rocks that have been in place on this lake for centuries. My father or his father or maybe even his father before him set the same sort of traps.

“Not in the dark. Deer bed down during the day. They like to move around at sunrise and sunset.”

“Oh.” She casts a long look at my rifle. “Are you really going to shoot one?”

“If I can.” I nod. “We need food so we can last out here.”

“That’s another question. How long do you think we’ll be out here? I mean, what’s the plan?”

I load the weir with some bait—some bits from an old MRE I found.

“Also, I need you to tell me what this is.” She gestures at the weir.

As I arrange it in the water, I explain how it works and show her how to do it herself if she were so inclined.

“So the fish swim in but are too dumb to get out?” She nods with appreciation. “That’s good to know.”

I stand and pull her up with me. “Now that’s set, we can go work on some small animal traps, then settle in for the big hunt.”

“Okay. I’ve learned to fish. Now I’m ready to learn to ... What is it we’re trying to catch now?”

I pull her close again as we maneuver over the boulder, and I can’t help but love the way she holds on to me. She trusts me, and that trust is something I’ve never felt before. It’s delicate, like a beautiful glass object that men like me are bound to break. Even so, I hope with all my being that I never so much as crack it.

When I put her on her feet again, we walk back up the hollow and into the flatter spots where the trees are thicker.

“I’ve noticed you don’t answer half my questions.” She leans against a tree as I begin to craft a small game trap.

“How’s that?”

“Well, you never told me how you knew Baines was sending people to kill me. And you never told me the plan for how long we’re going to be here. I feel like those are sort of important. I mean, my plan would be to lay low with you for as long as it takes.” She smiles down at me, and fuck me if I don’t tingle all over. But then she asks, “So, tell me, how did you know I was in danger?”

Does it all have to end so soon? I finish weighting the trap then stand and brush the dirt off my hands.

“You can tell me anything. You saved my life, you know?” She moves closer, unaware of how dangerous I am to someone like her.

I look into her eyes for long moments, wrestling with telling her everything or just enough. My soul says to spill it, but my mind says something else entirely.

I don’t know which is the right answer. But I take a breath and open my mouth to speak. When the crack of a shot rings out nearby, the words disappear into the ether as I take Margaret to the ground and cover her with my body.

MARGARET

I dig my fingers into Jacob's shirt as I stare up at him. His whole body has gone rigid, making it feel as though he weighs three times more than he had this morning when he was on top of me.

In fact, I think I can't breathe.

"Jacob." I finally get his name out. He looks down at me before covering my mouth with his hand. He leans closer, bringing his mouth to my ear. His warm breath tickles me, almost causing me to giggle. I hold it in, though.

"Not a word."

I nod slowly as he releases his hand from my mouth. My breathing becomes shallow, but I'm unsure if it's from the weight of his body or the fact that I'm turned on. I know I should probably be scared, but the only thing I can think about is how his thick body feels pressed against mine. Maybe it's the lack of oxygen that's making me euphoric.

Can't breathe, I mouth. I mean, I can a little, but not as much as I'm accustomed to. I guess I'm a girl who likes big, full breaths. I've never given it much thought before now. He shifts only a touch, taking some of his weight off me as he kisses my forehead. I'm pretty sure it's an *I'm sorry*. It's cute and how he should always say sorry. Though then he'd have to do something bad. Not sure that's a good idea. I'll have to think that one over.

BANG.

All random thoughts in my head stop as I remember why Jacob pulled me to the ground in the first place. Crap. They found us. We're going to die. I am going to die a virgin. What the hell? A few months ago I wouldn't have given a crap about that. Sure, I don't want to die, but now I absolutely don't want to die without having sex with Jacob. I need more time. I mean, couldn't they have waited another day or two before they came? This is important.

"I'll never let anything happen to you," he whispers as he starts to slide off me. He grabs the front of my shirt, and in one quick pull, I'm flat on my stomach. He gives me a signal not to move as he slowly starts to rise. That's when reality hits me. He says he won't let anything happen to me. What about him?

Now that I have a small part of him, I don't plan on allowing anyone to take him from me. For so long I've wanted this man to give me an ounce of attention, and now I have him all the time. In a secluded cabin. With *one* bed. Stupid killers are not going to ruin this for me!

You'd think these people would be running scared based on what I've already done to them with only my stuffie. Not to mention how deadly Jacob is. No, Mr. Black. I watched him kill without so much as a second thought. He put a bullet into a man as if it were nothing to him. He threw another out a window. To them, he's Mr. Black. To me, he's my Jacob.

I watch as he takes in his surroundings. He looks as though he's in his element. As if he's been in this same kind of situation before. His every move is calculated. I watch him closely and wonder what he sees that I don't. He flicks his eyes back to me for only a second. They're darker now than I ever remember. It's because Mr. Black is here now, and Jacob is gone.

Another loud bang sounds. It's closer than the last. His shoulders drop, and I see the tension leave his body. I don't understand why or what the heck is going on. That shot sounded the closest of them all.

"Hunter," he whispers and rises to his full height.

I panic for a moment. Is that some code word for contract killer? Why does he look so relaxed if it is? I have a million questions, but I don't ask them. I remain quiet as I watch him take another look around. He seems satisfied with whatever he sees. He reaches his hand out to me. I grab it, allowing him to pull me to my feet.

"How do you know?" I whisper, unable to keep my curiosity at bay. I can't see anything beyond the nearest trees. I also don't have my glasses on, to be fair.

"No one that's looking for me is coming with a 30-06 rifle."

I don't even know what that means. To me a gun is a gun.

He lets out a slow whistle. "I'm over here to your left, Mrs. Winston."

I try and follow his line of sight. Then I see an older woman with a shotgun slung over her shoulder. That's not the strangest part of the sight in front of me. The weird part is she's got rollers in her hair. The pink, soft kind. She looks like an innocent grandma and not the gun toting type.

"Lucky I didn't shoot your behind," she declares as she makes her way toward us. "Got me a beautiful ten pointer. Not the biggest I've ever seen, but it will put some meals on the table." She stops when she gets to us, then looks over at me. "Seems I'm not the only one that got a beautiful creature today." She sends me a friendly smile.

"That she is. It's a little early to be hunting." I'm surprised when Jacob tucks me into his side.

"That sun starts going down and I can't see shit. Plus, it's date night." She shoots me a wink, then turns back to Jacob. "Haven't seen you in a long while."

"Working."

That's it. One word. Wow. He really doesn't talk.

"You going to be out here long, Mrs. Winston? I'll make sure I stay due east."

"Not real sure, to be honest." Her eyes dart back and forth between us. Even though I'm standing tucked into Jacob's

side, I feel like the odd man out of a conversation I'm not really understanding.

"I'll keep an eye out." She gives him a nod, then points at me. "Keep him out of trouble. Men always get themselves in a mess over a pretty girl like you." I think that might be one of the backhanded compliments my mom's sister is great at. "By mess, I mean wind up dead."

"Don't mind her. She likes to play the grumpy old woman part."

Mrs. Winston shrugs. "I took theatre in the seventh grade, I'll have you know. *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I was the love interest, naturally."

"In 1927," Jacob throws back. I hit his chest.

Mrs. Winston just throws her head back and laughs. A roller falls out of her hair. I bend down and pick it up for her.

"Thanks. Like I said. My eyes are open. I'll let you know if I see anything." She turns and tramps off through the trees.

"She's strange," I whisper.

"I'm old, not deaf," she calls.

I throw my hand over my mouth and look up at Jacob. He smirks. It's not a laugh, but it's close.

I'll take it.

JACOB

“*H*er family’s lived out here just as long as mine. I let her hunt on my land when I’m not here, so that’s pretty much all the time.” I keep trudging ahead through the undergrowth until I find a suitable spot to set a sapling trap.

“She’s different, but I can tell she’s nice.” Margaret drops down to her haunches and watches as I loop the trap and tether the bent sapling to the ground to create a snare. I place some leafy greens we found along the way into the loop to lure rabbits, raccoons, even squirrels.

“Are we going to hunt for deer?” she asks, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Not now. Those shots scared off anything big, but we can try again tomorrow.” I loop around the cabin setting traps, and Margaret watches my every move.

“What happens if the sapling breaks?”

“The quarry gets away. If there’s no tension, my wire will fall off and they’ll live to fight another day.”

“Oh. Where did you learn to do this?”

“My father. He lived for the outdoor life. My cousins and I used to spend summers here together.”

“Are you still close with them?”

“One of them. But he’s an asshole most of the time.” And the main reason I have to work for Mr. Baines. But I can’t talk

about that. I won't. Thinking about it and the deal I made with Mr. Baines—that I've now blown—isn't something I can deal with right now. So I push it away.

"Do you?" She looks at me with those inquisitive eyes.

"Do I what?"

"Live for the outdoors?"

I don't want to answer. I feel like I've spoken more words to her in the past day than I have to anyone in the past decade. But if I keep talking, I'll eventually give her too much truth about me, and she'll run. As she should.

"You always seemed so polished in the office," she continues. "Your suits, the way you were so put together. All the men who came to see Mr. Baines were wealthy. You were like them in some ways, but not every way." Her cheeks heat. "I mean, you just seemed more ..."

"Rough?" I offer.

"That's one way of putting it. I think I'd say 'real.' They were there to kiss Mr. Baines's rear end, but when you showed up, I didn't get that vibe at all. If anything, I thought Mr. Baines might be a little scared of you, and that son-in-law of his definitely was."

"A lot of people are afraid of me." I look at her pointedly. "And they should be. I'm a bad man. Do you remember when I'd come into the office and you'd look away? You'd look anywhere but at me because you knew, somewhere deep down inside you, you could sense that I was no good. You should trust your instincts." I grunt as I finish setting the trap.

She stands when I do and grabs my arm. "You think I didn't look at you because I was scared of you?" She moves closer.

I forget the traps, the danger, the woods—everything. Nothing stirs in my mind when she looks up at me so sincerely, her eyes clear. No secrets. Nothing held back.

"Isn't that the reason?" I suddenly find my heart pounding so hard I feel it in my ears, my toes, and it's making my fingers tingle.

When she reaches up and presses her warm hand to my cold cheek, I close my eyes. Only for a moment, I'm lost in the sweetness of her soft touch.

"Of course it's not the reason." She steps closer, her breasts grazing my chest, her heat buffeting the front of my body. "I was never afraid of you, Jacob. I wasn't even afraid of Mr. Black."

"I don't know—"

"There are two of you. The one you show to the world, and the one you've shown to me. Mr. Black takes no prisoners. Jacob gives me everything I need. Mr. Black takes lives. Jacob *saved* my life. And I'm so grateful for you, Jacob. Those times in the office, I was never scared of you. I didn't look at you because I *wanted* you."

My head spins. Can this be true?

"I've gone my whole life ignoring men, not wanting to get involved, never so much as kissing anyone. Do you know why?" She strokes my cheek and moves even closer, her body pressing to mine.

I can't help myself, and I wrap one arm around her waist. The strange, warm feeling wells up inside me again, and I can't take my eyes off the angel in front of me.

"Because I was waiting for you." She rises onto her tiptoes and brushes her lips against mine. "You're the one I've wanted from the moment I saw you."

That's when I snap.

With a roar I pull her up my body, walk her to the pine tree at her back, pin her there, and kiss her just as hard and raw as I feel.

Her eyes fly open, then close slowly as I mark her mouth with my lips, branding her as my own as I run my hands down to her ass and squeeze.

She moans and wraps her legs around me, bringing me in tight to her. My cock seeks the heat between her thighs, and I groan

just thinking about being deep inside her, her pussy squeezing me as I grind into her.

Kneading her ass, I focus on her mouth, my tongue licking the seam until she opens for me. Then I go deeper, pressing my tongue to hers, teasing it out of her mouth as we kiss like we're starved for each other. The warmth that was growing in my chest turns into a blinding heat, and the feeling I didn't recognize finally gets a name.

Love. I'm in love with this beautiful, kind, innocent woman. And that should scare the shit out of me. But it doesn't. It only makes me hungrier for her.

Pulling one hand from her round ass, I tangle it in her hair and pull her head back. When I fasten my lips to her throat, she hisses and grips my shoulders. I go lower, nudging the coat apart with my chin as I kiss to her collarbone, then run my teeth along the ridge.

She moves her hips against me.

"Fuck, babe." It's all I can say as I release her hair and reach between us. When I cup her pussy, my cock tries to destroy my zipper, because her cunt is hot, and she's soaked through her leggings.

I ease my finger up and down her clit as she gasps.

"Where are your panties?" The words are more of a growl.

"I didn't pack any, and I washed my others, but they have to dry and—Oh!"

She wriggles as I stroke harder. "Jacob." Her breathy voice was made to say my name. Only my name.

I grip her ass with both hands and lift her higher, so high that she reaches for my head and grips my hair. Then I throw her thighs over my shoulders.

"Jacob, what are you—"

I lean forward, grab the legging fabric with my teeth, and yank my head back. The seam rips, and I get the full view of her soaked cunt.

My hips jerk, my cock demanding I seat myself fully inside her pink slit. But not yet. Right now, I have to taste it.

I bury my face there as she moans and grasps my hair. Both my hands are under her ass, and I push her up and toward me until I can't breathe, until I'm smothered in her juices, her slit pressed to my mouth as my tongue delves inside.

Groaning, I eat her pussy, lapping up every bit of her arousal as I lick and suck her tender flesh. The hole in her leggings grows as I reach up with one hand and rip them open even more.

Her moans fuel me onward, and I devour her. When I sample her clit, her thighs shake, and when I stroke it with my tongue over and over, her hips move erratically, her breath freezing.

When she moans my name and her hips lock, I plunge a finger inside her. Her cunt squeezes around me as I lick her with the broad side of my tongue. Her orgasm lasts, and I press in and out of her slickness, feeling her as I continue licking her innocence away stroke by stroke.

When she stops shaking and can breathe again, I kiss her cunt long and slow, then lower her to the ground.

She stands on shaky legs, but I hold her steady, then lean down and share her perfect taste with her.

Her arms wrap around my neck.

Then I hear a twig crack.

Whirling, I push her behind me and grab my rifle.

MARGARET

“Do you think it makes me a bad person that I feel worse about the deer dying than the men Jacob killed?” I ask Bernie, who purrs loudly as he sits on my lap and enjoys the attention I’m giving him. He’s been there since we got back to the cabin. Jacob is still outside handling the deer. I know I said I wanted to help earlier, but there’s only so much I could watch.

“The innocent deer didn’t do anything. Those men that were trying to kill you deserved to die,” Jacob says as he enters the cabin and lets me know he overheard my private conversation with Bernie.

I look up to see his shirt is now gone. I forget everything else as I stare at his naked broad chest. I lick my lips, suddenly hungry for something besides food. I watch him as he goes over to the kitchen and sets something in the sink.

“Ouch.” I’m snapped out of my lust-filled haze when Bernie lightly nips my hand. I look down at him as his little head butts up against my hand. “I got a little distracted. Sorry.” I begin stroking him again, but now my focus is on Jacob’s muscular back.

He’s strong. So strong. I mean, he lifted me up and tree and—I make a subconscious “mm” sound. Jacob freezes and cocks his ear toward me.

I clear my throat and try to recover. “But we still killed it,” I point out. “The deer, I mean.” I get it. The circle of life and all. I was merely wondering about my own reaction. I think he’s

right, though. Those men had come to kill me. Who knows how many others they've killed? Actually, I kind of have an idea based on the list I saw by accident.

"Yes, I will kill anything to keep you safe." He finally turns all the way to look at me. "To make sure that I can feed and provide for you."

Aww. How can I feel bad about the deer now that he went and made its murder all sweet? Bernie lets out a meow. I give him a look that says *give me a break* before I go back to petting him. How does he expect me to concentrate?

"They've killed others. That list I saw? Yeah, full of people they killed." I shrug. "Who cares if they die if they care so little about other people's lives, right?"

Jacob's gaze holds mine for a moment before he goes back to preparing whatever deer meat he's brought inside. A long silence hangs in the air. It feels different than the others, so I break it.

"Is there anything I can do?" That doesn't involve me hacking into things.

"I can cook for you." He turns the water on in the sink. My eyes keep roaming his body. I lick my lips, wondering what the rest of him looks like without clothes on. I'm hoping I find out tonight.

"But maybe I want to help." I give Bernie a kiss on his head before lifting him off my lap to stand up.

"If that's what you want to do."

I want to tell him I'd rather we eat each other and forget about food, but I'm not so sure he'd be down for that. But it's his fault I'm greedy for his mouth now. With the way he's been handling the deer, I know he's not going to be agreeable to anything until he gets some real food inside me.

"Stay put. I'll go grab a few things." He heads back outside. I don't follow. I've seen him kill, but I'm getting the feeling that he doesn't want me to see him butcher the deer. It isn't on the top of my list of things to see, either. So when he ushered me inside, I didn't complain.

He's back a few minutes later with a few more ingredients.

I walk over to him and put my hand on his arm. "Can I have a kiss?" There is still something hanging in the air between us.

The surprise in his eyes at my question tears at my heart. Has no one asked for affection from him before? He's so good at giving it.

I feel a small amount of tension leave his body as he leans down to kiss me.

I sigh into his mouth. One of my favorite parts of kissing him is I never know what kind of kiss I'll be getting. Some are sweet and gentle, while others are hard and possessive. Demanding that I part my lips for him and give him what he seeks. This one is tentative. I know one thing without a doubt: I love them all.

Jacob seems to relax some after we pull our mouths from one another. We get into a rhythm in the kitchen. Cooking and preparing as though we've done it together a million times before. I even have plans for dessert when I remember the Snickers I have in my bag. We move around the kitchen and each other with ease. Not two people that barely know each other, but more like two people who do it every night. For once in my life I'm quiet, enjoying the dance of moving around each other.

"Did you pick these?" He puts our plates on the table.

"I was trying to give the place a little color." The cabin is cute, but it could use some sparkle. I figured a little splash here and there would make it more warm and inviting.

"You like flowers." He says it like he's making a mental note.

"Love them." I pick up my fork and take a bite of the stew we made together. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it isn't the yumminess that hits my taste buds.

"This is really good." I take another bite. Jacob only watches me. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"Yeah." He looks down at his food and takes a bite. I end up clearing my plate, not realizing how hungry I was until that

first bite hit my stomach.

“More?” Jacob starts to rise from his seat.

“No.” I stop him. “I can’t eat another bite.”

He takes my plate from me and heads back to the sink.

“We can save the rest for later.” He turns to me, looking almost uncomfortable. What happened? “I’m going to shower.” He gives me one last look before heading into the bathroom.

I took a quick one right when we got back. I curse myself, because now I can’t say ‘Let me join you.’ I get up from the table and go to the bed, falling back onto it and looking up at the ceiling as I replay everything that’s happened since we got back to the cabin.

I thought things were going well. I bite my lip as I remember his mouth on me. I’d wanted so much more, but we were cut short. I sit back up when I hear the shower flip off.

Jacob is different from every other man I’ve met. I’m not sure he knows what to do with a woman. He’s tentative, but he wasn’t when he pinned me against that tree. His mouth—I squeal into the pillow.

Maybe he’s unsure of what to do? Sometimes I think I catch a bit of shyness from him. He doesn’t let it linger for too long. He could be uncertain that he’s doing the right thing with me. I tend to be shy, too. All of this *is* new to me. Maybe I need to be a bit more upfront. I thought I’d done that when I asked for the kiss in the kitchen, but obviously he needs me to push a little harder. What else can it be?

I’m not going to let him try to put up a wall again. I want Jacob, and I’m going to show him that. He doesn’t have to be uncertain. The man saved me. In my eyes, I am his. Only his.

Before I can change my mind, I turn Wally around to face the wall. “This isn’t for pandacorns to witness. You’re too innocent,” I whisper to his slightly charred back. Then I strip from my clothes. I jerk around when I hear the bathroom door open.

“I forgot clean cloth-” He stops talking when he sees me.

I try not to cover myself with my hands. It’s not that I don’t want him to see me; it’s just new to be naked in front of someone.

“Babe.” His rough voice, and the way his eyes are eating me up are all it takes for me to stop caring about my nudity. I walk to him.

“It’s my turn,” I tell him in my most hopefully-sexy tone.

“Your turn?” His voice is hoarse.

I lick my lips. “Yes. My turn.” I drop to my knees and pull on his towel as I go. His cock bobs in my face. I try not to let the size scare me. He brought me pleasure with it this morning, rubbing against me until I came. It doesn’t matter how big Jacob is, he’d figure it out for us one way or another. The same way he does with everything else. The important thing is, I know he would never hurt me.

“You don’t have to-” His words are cut off as I wrap my hand around him and lean in more. A bead of cum drips from the tip. I must be doing something right.

“You might have to teach me.” I lick the drop of cum, tasting the sweet saltiness. I moan, loving the way he feels on my tongue. I slip my other hand between my thighs to try and calm the ache so I can concentrate on taking care of him.

“Teach you?” His breaths are coming out heavy now. For a man who can kill without a second thought, I seem to be holding him in the palm of my hand. I look up at him, wanting to see his facial expression. Needing to see what I’m doing to him.

“Never done this before.” I circle my tongue around the head of his cock again, getting another taste of him before I take him into my mouth fully. I close my eyes and take him as deep as I can.

“Anything you do is fine.” He grabs the frame of the door. It gives a loud groan. I suck him further into my mouth while working my hand up and down. “Are you touching yourself? Fuck.”

I don't think it's really a question, so I don't answer him. I continue sucking him, wanting to give him the same pleasure he gave me. I'm getting more turned on from his reactions.

I pull back, letting him slip from my mouth. I keep stroking him. "But I want you to tell me what you like. I want to do it right."

"I wouldn't know." Those three words cause the ache between my legs to turn into an unbearable throb. His hand brushes my cheek. I lean into his touch, smiling up at him.

"No one has done this to you before?" I turn my head and kiss his palm.

He shakes his head. "I think putting your dick into someone's mouth is-

I don't let him finish before I'm taking him into my mouth again, knowing what he was going to say. He needs to have a certain level of trust for that. I don't know if Jacob really trusts me. I don't know what's happening between us, but I do know that I want whatever it is. I never want it to stop.

JACOB

This is a fantasy come to life, and I know I should stop. I should tell her the truth about me, about the man I really am. But when she wraps her sweet lips around me, I can't do anything except enjoy it and try my damndest not to come in her mouth.

I run my hands through her hair, tangling my fingers in her soft strands as she runs her tongue along the bottom of my shaft. My hips jerk, and I try to keep them still as she continues tasting me, her mouth exploring as I try to get a grip.

Pulling back, she smiles up at me. "I like it."

"Don't stop." I didn't mean to say it so low and rough, but when I do, her fingers move lower and she touches herself as she takes me in her hot mouth again.

Her moan sends chills racing over my skin, and when she sucks me, I hold on to her hair for dear life. Slowly, she begins to work me, bobbing her head back and forth as she strokes her clit with one hand and grips my base with the other.

I can't look away, can't stop staring at this beautiful woman on her knees in front of me. When my head touches the back of her throat, I pull her away. If I don't, I'd bust in her mouth. That's not who she is. And I won't waste my seed on her tongue. Not when I know where it belongs.

With a pull, I lift her to her feet and carry her to the bed. Then I lay her down. This is it. The moment that I've dreamed about with her and only her. But is it right? To dirty up an angel like her?

“Don’t stop.” She reaches for me, her hand going to my cock.

When she strokes me and leans over to lick away the pre-cum, I know it’s over. I can’t stop this. I was a fool to ever think I could.

“Lie back.” I fist myself and climb on top of her.

She grips my biceps as I lower myself to her and kiss her lips. I’m ravenous for her, too rough. But I need to feel her, every bit of her arousal and desire. So I kiss her hard, making my mark, leaving a piece of me mingled with her as our breaths join and become one.

“I want you,” she breathes. “Please, Jacob.”

When she’s whimpering and rocking her hips against me, I break away and kiss down her neck, sucking and teasing. Sliding down her body, I can feel the slickness on her thighs, and my cock demands I seal the deal.

Not yet. Not until I sample her, all of her. I circle one of her thick nipples with my tongue, then suck it into my mouth.

Her moan bounces off the walls and back to my ears, and I growl against her flesh and palm her other tit, twisting her nipple before biting it.

Her back arches, but I keep her pinned, her body mine to enjoy. My beautiful prey laid out before me. I feel her breasts, holding one in each hand. When I press them together and suck both nipples into my mouth, she shudders and moans, her fingernails digging into my shoulders.

I could stay here all day, right here, sucking her tits and making her writhe, but the scent of her pussy draws me lower until I get a look at how wet she is.

“I need you.” Her voice is a whine, one that shoots steel into my cock.

I need her too, so I open my mouth wide and eat her pussy. She moans and shakes as I suck and lick her wetness, coating my mouth and chin with her as I savor every reaction. Reaching down, I stroke my cock as I tongue-fuck her, pleasuring us both as we teeter on the edge.

She pulls my hair. “Inside me, please Jacob.”

There’s nothing on heaven or earth that could get me to stop now, not when she begs so sweetly.

I return to her mouth and kiss as I rub my cock on her wet slit. “You want me to fuck this pure pussy with my filthy cock?” I growl against her lips.

“Yes,” she gasps.

“I’m a bad man, babe. So bad.” I nibble her chin. “You sure?”

“I don’t care if you’re Satan himself, just fuck me, Jacob!”

I surge forward, following some deep instinct that tells me just how to enter her willing body. And when I slide in so deep, I have to stop so I don’t come right then and there.

“Oh, fuck babe.” I groan.

She arches again, and I fasten my teeth to her throat.

Pulling out, I push deep again, her body giving me no resistance as I claim her cunt for my own.

“No one else,” I growl. “No one else will ever feel this.” I push all the way, fully embedded in her hot cunt as she claws at my shoulders.

“It’s yours, Jacob.”

“Mine,” I agree and return to her eyes, looking down into the stunning face that captured my heart the first time I saw her. “And all this—” I push against her hips. “Is yours.”

“Yes.” She nods and leans up to claim my lips as I pull out a little and slide back in.

It takes a few tries for us to get on the same rhythm, but when we do, pleasure like I’ve never experienced ripples up and down my spine. My cock is hard enough to break a diamond, and I can feel every breath Margaret takes, every moment when she squeezes me tighter.

I lean back on my knees and stare down at her. When I thrust, her tits jolt. I thrust harder, then grab the perfect mounds in my

hands, still fucking her as I squeeze her tits and twist her nipples.

She eases one hand down her body and strokes her clit, her eyes on me. “Don’t stop touching me.”

“Never.” I lean down and suck one of the stiff peaks into my mouth, tasting her again as she fingers her clit. Then I get jealous. I want to touch her.

So I pull back and gently push her hand away. “Like this?” I press my thumb to her clit and stroke it sideways as I rock into her.

“Jacob.” She grips the blankets. “Yes!”

“Faster?” I fuck her at the same pace, my hips pistoning as she opens her mouth wide, her body freezes, and her breath comes out in a rolling whimper with my name on her lips.

Perfect when she comes. That’s my only thought as I shove deep inside her squeezing cunt and release. It hits so hard I see black stars as I shoot inside her, coating her cunt with me, planting my seed inside her and claiming her as mine.

Her orgasm continues, her body still taut as I shoot the last of my cum, my body covered in sweat and my mind shattered into a million pieces.

When she finally relaxes against the bed, I fall on top of her but am careful to support myself with my elbows as I kiss her face, her lips, her neck. Reverently. Adoringly.

Because that’s what she deserves. All of me, and nothing less.

MARGARET

Warm breath tickles my skin before I feel Jacob softly press his lips against mine. Our legs are tangled together. His skin presses against mine. I don't remember falling asleep. I open my eyes to meet his. He gives me a smile. I love that I can make him smile.

"Were you watching me sleep?" I trace my finger down his face and feel the roughness of his morning stubble.

"Yes."

I push on his chest so he falls to his back. Then I climb on top of him and snuggle close. I stretch out, making myself comfortable.

"Do you not like when I stare at you?" His deep, rumbling voice is so comforting.

I tilt my head back so I can look up at him. "You can stare at me all you want. I just wanted to use you as a bed."

He sure as heck is big enough. Not only that, I love the feeling of being pressed up against him. It soothes me. "I like being close to you."

He wraps his arms around me, making me feel as though we are in our own little bubble. Letting me forget everything else in the outside world for a little while.

"I don't think many others have ever shared the same sentiment."

“Good. I don’t want others enjoying being next to you.” I laugh. He’s mine now, and everyone else can stay far away.

I sit up, naked and feeling so good in my skin.

“You’re soft everywhere.” His rough hands start to roam my body. I let out a long sigh, enjoying his hands on me. If I were a cat I bet I’d purr louder than Bernie, who’s made himself scarce. I bet Jacob and I scared him. His hand moves higher to my throat.

“Talk,” he orders.

“Oh, you want *me* to talk?” I laugh.

“I enjoy the sound of your voice.”

I lean down and kiss his chest.

“I enjoy yours, too.”

He keeps moving his hands. They’re now pressing firmer into me, massaging my muscles. I do have small aches everywhere now that I think about it. I didn’t know there was such a thing as a good ache before Jacob, but there is.

A memory surfaces. “I remember the first day I saw you. I didn’t think you noticed me at all.”

“There is no fucking way *not* to notice you. When you’re in a room, nothing else matters.”

My heart goes to mush, and I can’t stop looking at him. I bet he had no clue that he has this sweet side to himself. I’m not sure he even knows that what he just said is sweet. I love that he’s opening up more to me. This is something that’s just for me. I don’t care if it’s selfish. It’s my turn to be selfish with somebody’s attention for once.

“Jacob, I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but you’re pretty noticeable yourself.” He is a force to be reckoned with. He doesn’t even have to look at you or utter a single word. You can feel him in the air all around you. His presence in a room could never be denied. It’s what drew me to him to begin with. “You were so stoic. Always so calm and focused. I wondered how someone could be so quiet and if you could teach me your ways.” I shake with laughter as I say it. “I wanted to talk

to you so many times but knew that I would never be able to control my mouth. It always gets me into trouble.” I send him a wicked little smile as I recall what I did to him with my mouth last night.

“I rather enjoy when your mouth gets you into a little trouble.” He smiles, then reaches up and runs his thumb over my lips.

“Jacob Black. Did you just make a joke?” I smile so wide. I love that he’s coming out of his shell. I swear he lets out a small laugh that makes my heart fill with happiness.

“I’ll never teach you how to be quiet.”

The real him, the one he hides, is the one I love. Jacob. And now I can finally see him. I knew if I wanted him to start talking more I’d have to lead the way. It’s the first time in my life that being a chatterbox is useful.

“I do think I enjoy talking, but sometimes I wonder if I talk so much because I’m lonely. I can’t seem to make friends at work. The only one that’s really stuck with me is Selena. She can be quite a lot like you, too. I mean, look at my parents. I haven’t heard from them in forever. Most of the time it’s me reaching out to them.”

I feel good admitting that insecurity out loud. The best part of it is that when I look down at Jacob, I still have his full attention. He’s listening to every single word I say. As if the next one is just as important as the one before it.

In a flash I’m under Jacob. He looms over me, anger etched in the lines on his forehead. “Fuck them and anyone that made you think you weren’t worth their time. You say no one in that office wanted to be your friend, but all I ever witnessed was you being kind to everyone. Even though you thought they didn’t like you, still you gave them your respect. Not many could say the same.”

My eyes sting with tears. “For someone who doesn’t care to talk much you sure do say the sweetest stuff to me.”

“I say the truth to you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck.

He growls into my ear. “Look at the effect you have on me. One touch from you and I’m done for. One look and I’m putty in your hands. One smile is all it took for me to know that I’d always want you. That my life was meaningless before you were in it.”

“I feel the same about you. You keep telling me you’re bad, but leaving you hasn’t crossed my mind once. I wasn’t lying when I said it doesn’t matter to me how bad you are.” I don’t care what he’s done. His touches and caresses don’t lie. He may be bad, but he’s so damn good for me.

Jacob doesn’t say or do anything he really doesn’t want to. Hell, he might even pretend to take orders. He might even believe he’s taking them. You’ll never convince me Jacob isn’t doing something because he chooses to for some reason or another.

“If you only knew the truth.” His voice is gruff.

“Then what? Do you believe it would make me leave you?”

“You would try.” I can see sadness in his eyes when he thinks about me leaving him. It makes me think that Jacob is lonelier than I’ve ever been.

“Try?” I lick my bottom lip. I already know the answer. At least I hope I do. He won’t let me go. That should scare me. It doesn’t. I’m far from scared. I wrap my legs around him. I’m not going anywhere. Jacob thinks he’s a bad man. Maybe he is but he’s *my* bad man now.

JACOB

“*T*his is so easy. It’s like fishing for dummies or something.” Margaret gawks as I pull some carp from the water and stow them in my basket.

“It’s a skill. One that you know now.” I grab a bream and two more before pulling the trap from the water and shaking it off.

“Right. I can fish now!” She claps her hands.

“Sure, but you don’t have to worry about that.” I loop the trap over my shoulder and turn to her. “That’s what I’m for.”

She smiles, her bright eyes like a spotlight on me, lighting up all my darkness. It feels so good just to be with her. Waking up to her wrapped around me, I knew I didn’t deserve this sort of happiness. But the more I get, the more I realize I can’t live without it. Without her.

“Now that I know how to fish, I can pretty much rough it for the rest of my life. But, even better, I have you to do all that for me.” She taps a thoughtful finger to her chin. “So how long can we stay out here? Forever? You and me in our little cabin by the lake?”

That sounds like heaven on earth. But it’s one I can’t promise her. Not with danger on her trail. We’re safe here, probably for a long time. But Mr. Baines is a patient man, and he never leaves a loose end.

“What?” Her face falls. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, babe.” I wrap my non-fishy arm around her and pull her close. “You say everything right.”

“Then what’s going on in that handsome head of yours?” She pulls away and looks up at me.

I don’t want to ruin this, and I’m on the edge of doing just that. So instead of telling her what we’re up against, I claim her mouth in a rough kiss.

She protests at first, perhaps trying to continue our conversation. But when she opens her mouth, I delve inside. Her taste erases every logical thought from my mind, and I slant my lips over her. Devouring her makes me feel alive, more alive than I’ve ever been. And when she moans and grips my shirt, pulling me closer, I silently vow that I will never let her go, never give up the bond that links us like a band of gold.



“When you said we needed to ‘clean’ the fish, I thought you meant like, I don’t know, rub them down with lemon or something?” She winces as I scrape the side of the bass, scales flying onto the pine straw beneath my small cleaning table at the back of cabin.

I laugh. It feels amazing. I haven’t laughed in years. Not freely, not with true joy. But that’s what she gives me.

“I clean them by getting rid of the scales.” I pause and grab one of the bream I already cleaned. “Then I take my knife—” I slide it up the fish’s stomach, reach inside, and pull out the organs, then toss them into a bucket. “Now we have just meat and bones left.”

She winces.

I smile. “Babe, you don’t have to watch if—”

“No. I’m fine. I want to learn. You know so much about everything. I want you to show me how to rough it and be, you know, tough like you.”

“You’re perfect just as you are. There’s nothing you need from me.” I slice the fish up behind its head, then lay open the inside in a filet stroke. I glance at her where she sits on her

perch atop the narrow back porch. “Seriously. You don’t have to watch.”

“Continue, fish master. Teach me.” She waves a hand.

I sigh. “All right. Well, then you cut carefully along here to get rid of the biggest bones.” I slide the knife down and around. “After that’s gone, you can pull the filet out and use your fingers to remove any pin bones that remain.” I finish the two filets and set them aside, then grab the bass I’ve been working on. “Same thing here.” I slide the knife up its stomach and reach inside to pull out the guts.

“There’s so much ...” She makes a gagging sound. “So much blood.” For the first time, I understand the expression about someone looking “green around the gills.”

I put my knife down and move so I stand between her and the gutted fish. “Babe, go inside.”

“No, I want to be tough like you.”

“You *are* tough. Way tougher than I am.”

She makes a pfft sound.

I shake my head. “Do you remember when I said I’d noticed that you were kind to every soul in that office? To everyone who crossed your path?”

“Yeah, but what does that have to do with—”

“That takes courage, babe. That takes *strength*. To give kindness when there’s a pretty good chance you aren’t going to get it in return—that’s something I’ve *never* done. Because it takes someone who’s real, who’s a fighter, and who can take it when that kindness isn’t returned. You are tough.” I cast a glance over my shoulder, then smirk. “But maybe just not where blood’s concerned.”

She grimaces. “I’d smack you if I wouldn’t get fish ick on me. And then I’d run.”

I growl, my gaze tracing down her body. “I’d chase you down, babe. Pin you to the ground and give you every inch until you came all over my cock.”

Standing, she fans her face with one hand. “Yeah, I’m going to go inside. Because if I don’t...” Her gaze travels south, over my bare chest and abs, then lands on the bulge in my jeans. “I’ll test that theory.”

“Wait until after I’m cleaned up.” I lick my lips. “Then we can see who’s faster.”

I swear I see a little shiver go through her, and she bites her lip.

“Go on now. I’ll bring in the cleaned fish in a few minutes. No blood. Promise.”

“Okay.” She slips inside the back door.

My cock demands I finish it up now and show her just how much she turns me on. But I can’t have my woman going hungry. Margaret should at least have a full stomach when I fuck the orgasms out of her.

I return to my work, cleaning the last of the fish while I think about all the ways I want to please Margaret. My tongue, my fingers, my cock. Every bit of me. I’ll happily devote the rest of my life to making that woman happy.

While cleaning up with soap, vinegar, and the hose, I make the decision that’s been weighing on me for days. I won’t tell Margaret about my past. What does it matter now? It doesn’t. All that matters is our future together. I’m not Mr. Black anymore. Not to her. I’m Jacob. And that’s who I want to be. She’s the only person in this world who could turn me into a good man. I want to be good. For her. Only for her.

I sniff my hands one last time to make sure the fish smell is all gone. Once I’m certain I’m squeaky, I don my shirt and head back to the cabin.

I pop up onto the back step and open the door.

The last thing I see is Margaret’s terrified eyes as someone comes up behind me and knocks me out cold.

MARGARET

“*P*lease don’t hurt him. It’s me you want.”

Unconscious, Jacob lies on the ground. He’s still breathing.

I thought we’d have more time. I need more time. I just got Jacob, and now they’re going to try and take him away. Worse, he’s in this mess because of me. This is my fault.

“The boss wants both of you now. He said there’d be an extra bonus if I bring you in alive.”

Bernie jumps from his window perch and hisses, then skitters under the bed when the man goes for him.

“Pussy.” The guy laughs at his own stupid joke as Bernie growls low and deep, then swipes with his claws out, scratching the man’s hand.

“Shit!” He pulls back and leaves the growling Bernie alone.

I swallow, trying to fight back the fear that’s crawling up my throat.

The man isn’t as big as Jacob, but he’d clearly gotten the jump on him. Again, my fault. If Jacob weren’t preoccupied with me, this would have never happened.

He bends down and starts tying Jacob’s hands. I debate if I should run or not. But I know there’s no way I can leave Jacob. If the order isn’t to outright kill me, then I think Mr. Baines has plans to torture me.

“Don’t even think about it. You’ll never make it.”

I look to my left to see a tall brunette in all black standing on the front porch. She's got a gun in her hand. "How did you get Mr. Black to save you?" She cocks her head to the side, her eyes assessing me with curiosity.

"I love him." I look back at Jacob, willing him to wake up so I'll know he's all right. I have no idea how we're going to get out of this. Maybe this is the end. At least I got a little time with him. I wouldn't change that for anything. These past few days have been the happiest of my life.

"Love him?" She laughs. "And you think he loves you?" She laughs harder. "Mr. Black doesn't love anything. Except maybe killing."

"Killing?" I shake my head.

"You don't know?" She grins. "Mr. Black is a stone-cold killer. He murders for money. That's what he does for Mr. Baines. Well, what he *did*. Until this little stunt."

My mouth goes dry. Is this what he meant when he said he was a bad man? Is he the one who killed the people on the list I saw? It's completely out of place, but a burst of laughter pops out of my lungs.

"The fuck is funny to you right now?" The woman steps closer.

I can't believe Jacob thought I would run from him. Never. Maybe he's bad to everyone else. Maybe he's done terrible things. But for me? For me he's perfect and kind. And I know he'll always be that way to me and those I love. This makes me just as 'bad' as him, and I don't care.

"Didn't even know he was a killer, you stupid little thing." She tsks.

"He's going to kill you next." The smile drops from her face, and I can see a trace of fear in her eyes before she masks it. It makes me wonder how deadly my Jacob really is. "How'd you even find this place?"

The woman reaches in her pocket and pulls out a marble. I squint—no, it's an eye. "Wally." I glance at my stuffie. "She

brought your missing eye!” He doesn’t seem particularly enthused.

“Highway surveillance caught your lover boy searching the aftermath of the wreckage the two of you caused. I got the video, then followed his trail.” She tosses Wally’s eye on the floor at my feet. “Come on. I want out of here. All we have to do is drop them off and we’re done. Piece of cake. We’ll get our money and never look back,” she says to the man who is now trying to pick Jacob up, with no luck.

“I’m going to need a hand here.”

“If you run, I’ll cut off one of his fingers,” she snarls as she moves to help.

My stomach cramps. I feel like I’m going to vomit. My eyes sting with tears, and my emotions are all over the place.

“I’m not going to run.”

“Isn’t that sweet.” She gives me a mocking smile. “You’re awfully protective of a man who was sent to kill you.”

My heart drops. Her words are like a physical blow. *That’s* why he was at my apartment that night? I’d asked him once, but he never said, and I let it go. Maybe I shouldn’t have.

The woman helps her accomplice lift Jacob and carry him out of the cabin. I follow them, my heart racing as I hope for a miracle. After we’ve gone over the small rise to the right of the cabin, I see two black SUVs sitting under the trees. They load Jacob in the back of one first.

The man goes over to the other SUV and holds the door open for me.

“Get in,” he orders.

Feeling numb all over, I do as I’m told and get into the back seat. There’s no other choice.

I think he’s going to cuff me or something, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t think I’m a threat. I know I need to remain as calm as I can. I don’t want Jacob to have to pay for any slip-ups or mistakes I make.

He shuts the door. I watch out the window as the two of them talk, then start to argue. I can't hear their exact words, but I'm pretty sure it's over who's going to drive Jacob. I can tell that neither one of them wants to do it.

"He's tied up, for Chrissakes," the man yells and pushes the brunette away. "Put on your big girl panties and just follow me. Fuck!"

It's not long before the male kidnapper is opening the driver's side door and getting in. I watch as the brunette walks toward the other SUV. She seems scared. I can't say I blame her. She better pray that Jacob doesn't wake up. Because the minute he realizes I'm gone, all hell is going to break loose.

He starts the car and we begin to move, bouncing over the rough gravel tracks that lead to the highway, heading to who knows where. I try not to cry. Jacob was sent to kill me. The brunette's words keep playing back in my head. Yet he hadn't. The question is why.

What had changed his mind? I don't really know. We've only just gotten to know each other after the fact. I'm innocent. Does that mean Jacob kills innocent people? A tear escapes my eye, and I quickly wipe it away.

My gaze meets the kidnapper's in the rearview mirror. He looks away, going back to the road. I glance behind us to see the woman is following.

What if Jacob *does* kill innocent people? When I thought he just killed bad guys, that was different. But what if he kills good guys, too? What does that mean for us? Could I still be with him? Would I be able to live with that truth?

"What's your name?" I ask the man.

"Doesn't matter," he responds, sounding bored as he turns onto the highway.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To die." His eyes meet mine in the mirror again, and he smirks. I look back to make sure Jacob is still following us.

“I’ll try not to make it hurt ... too much.” This jerk wants to see me scared. He’s getting off on it.

I give him nothing. I bet if Jacob could see me, he’d be so proud of me. “You know Mr. Black?”

“Everyone knows him.”

“Why does everyone know him?” I can’t stop myself from asking questions. It’s my nature.

“When you’re the best at something, your name gets around.”

“And Jacob is the best at killing?” I look down at my hands that I’m wringing together now. When Jacob is with me, he doesn’t seem like a killer. He did tell me over and over that he was a bad man. I wonder what led him down this path. How did he pick killing as a profession? And last but not least, how many people did he have to kill in order to be known as the best at it?

“Yes, except for little blond girls.” This time when he looks at me his eyes roam my body. I push back in my seat, wanting to get away from him. “You must be something special.” He licks his lips. “Maybe we’ll get a chance for you to show me what’s so special about you.”

“He’ll kill you.” Jacob might have been sent to kill me, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He might be a killer, but he’s mine now.

“If he’s going to kill me, I might as well have a little fun before he does.”

I don’t know if he’s trying to scare me or he means his words. Either way, bile rises in my throat.

“Fuck!” he shouts, then turns to look behind us.

I follow his line of sight and see the SUV swerving back and forth on the highway.

“Fuck fuck fuck!”

I gasp when the SUV takes a hard turn before flipping over and skidding off the road.

“Jacob!” I cry. “Are you going to stop? We have to help them.” We get farther and farther from the SUV as he picks up speed. “Your friend. What about her?”

“Fuck her. Now shut up. I need to think.” He gases it even more, the SUV and Jacob fading behind us.

“No.” Tears stream down my face. There’s no stopping him now. I watch until I can no longer see the SUV. He’s all right. I tell myself. The accident wasn’t that bad. This one didn’t blow up, so that’s a positive.

“Fuck,” I hear the man say again. I turn back around and watch him. His whole demeanor has changed now. He’s scared. He knows Mr. Black is free. He knows that within seconds he went from the hunter to the hunted. I have a sneaking suspicion that Mr. Black isn’t going to show him an ounce of mercy.

“You could let me out. Then he can’t chase you.”

“Shut up.”

“He’ll be more worried about getting me somewhere safe, and you could get away.”

With an angry grunt, he jerks the vehicle over to the side of the road, then grabs a silver roll of tape from the passenger seat. He rips off a piece before leaning into the back and putting it over my mouth.

“Remove it, and I’ll hog tie you.” He tosses the tape into the floorboard before pulling back onto the road. He may have sealed my mouth shut, but he’s also sealed his fate. My Jacob said I should never be silenced.

JACOB

Rebecca puts up a hell of a fight when the SUV finally comes to rest on the median. She's injured, her left arm broken at a horrible angle and glass embedded in her cheek, but she still manages to fire her pistol at me three times. Her screech is ear-splitting before I lunge through the wreckage and grab her head.

"Never should have touched my girl, Rebecca. You know better."

"Fuck you," she grunts and fires another round.

I twist her neck until I hear the familiar, gruesome snap.

She goes limp, and I go to work. I strip her knives away, then take her gun. I only have the rest of the magazine. If she has another, it's somewhere in the grass or in the mess of crushed metal around us.

I run my fingers across my temple. They come away bloody. I don't feel anything, though. No pain or fear. No, there's only one emotion running through my veins. Vengeance.

I stow the weapons, then kick out what's left of the front windshield and crawl from the wreck. Jogging to the road, I stop and get my bearings. We only got a few miles from the cabin when I dislocated my arm to slip from the rope and attack Rebecca. I roll that shoulder. Sore but functioning.

Waiting to carjack someone isn't going to work. Not out here.

Fuck. Each second Margaret is in that asshole Greg's custody is one second too many. I have to get to her. And there's no

time to waste.

I know where I need to go. Taking off, I run down the road, pacing myself as I head toward the only person in these woods who'll help me, no questions asked.

I don't get half a mile before I see her car up ahead, the old beater with the rusty paint job rolling toward me.

Mrs. Winston pulls up, and I jump in.

"I heard a commotion. Then gunshots." She raises a gray brow at me. "Trouble?"

"They took her." I point down the road.

"Then let's go get her." She smiles, and I realize she ran out without her dentures. "Now who took that girl you love?" She floors the pedal, her old Gremlin coughing and wheezing but picking up speed. "Some sort of terrorists? Maybe a foreign government?" She gasps. "Was it aliens?"

"Worse," I grate out as we barrel down the highway.

"Heh?" she asks.

The whine and rumble of the engine makes talking difficult, so I point ahead and yell. "Keep the pedal down. Then when I start up the trouble, keep your head down. There's going to be blood." I flex my fists. "A lot of it."

She cackles and shifts gears, the car giving a little more push as she takes a curve at high speed. "That's all I needed to know. It's been too long since I was in the thick of it, but I'm ready. Why, me and your grandad used to moonlight with the Chicago mafia. Did he tell you that?" She cackles again. "Oh, I miss wet work. I sure do."

We hurtle down the road until it finally meets the freeway. Each mile takes me closer to my woman, and when I find her, I will punish everyone responsible for this. They will pay, and if she wishes it, I will bring their heads to my Margaret.



The moonless night is quiet and windy as we pull up in front of Baines International's high rise in the city. Margaret's in there. I can feel it.

I reach for the door handle.

"I can cover you." Mrs. Winston hitches a thumb at the rifle she's stowed in the back window.

"I can't risk you." I meet her eyes and take her hand, the skin wrinkled and soft. "Thank you for this."

"Anytime." She squeezes my fingers, her grip still strong. "One request—could you maybe bring me a scalp so I can relive the good ol' days and—oh, never mind." She shakes her head. "My collection is plenty big from that time I took down a terrorist cell in Bosnia."

I would've said yes. But I suppose it's a good thing she changed her mind—only because Margaret doesn't care for the sight of blood.

"Go get that girl and kiss the tar out of her." She releases my hand and shifts into neutral. "I'll be waiting for your quick getaway." She guns the sputtering engine.

"Again. Thank you."

"Kill them all." She gives me an endearing, if toothless, grin.

I jump from the car and trot up to the building.

The security guard at the door takes one look at me through the glass door and pulls his gun. Mine's already pointed at him, and I shoot from the hip, shattering the plate glass door and his heart with one shot.

A few staffers in the lobby scatter as I step through the door and head for the elevator bank. I know Baines. He won't want to leave the comfort of his top floor office, not even for this. I hit the elevator button and step inside.

The ride is quick, and when the doors open, I sling two knives into the first guard I see, then dive behind Margaret's desk as two others open fire.

As the desk splinters around me, a smile turns the corners of my lips. Not because I love this work, though I do. But because the moment I stepped on this floor, I heard my favorite sound in the whole world. Margaret. Talking. A mile a minute. Just the way I like.

MARGARET

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I didn’t think he was going to bring me here. I was sure it would be to some abandoned warehouse or something. Not back to the office. I pray Jacob knows where I am. He’ll come for me. I know it. I just hope it’s in time.

“Sit.” He pushes me onto the sofa in Mr. Baines’s office. I didn’t like being alone with him in the SUV. He makes me feel uncomfortable. He stares a little too much. I’m almost relieved other people are around, even though I know their intentions aren’t any better. Mr. Baines’s personal security guys all looked away as I was dragged off the elevator.

“If I were you I’d get out of this place. Mr. Black will be here at any moment.”

He glares at me. I love the fear that flashes in his eyes whenever I say Jacob’s name.

“Can you shut the fuck up for a minute?” He runs his hand through his hair. I’m guessing we’re waiting for Mr. Baines to arrive.

I don’t understand why they didn’t kill me immediately. All of this seems unnecessary and careless on their part. None of it makes any sense. Why bring me here of all places? They must need something from me. “And why the fuck are you talking? Where the hell did that tape go?” He suddenly remembers. “I told you—” He lifts his hand.

I cover my face.

“Don’t.” A calm voice delivers the command.

I peek out of my fingers to see Mr. Baines standing there. He’s in his normal all-black suit. After spending a few days with Jacob, Mr. Baines doesn’t seem so intimidating. “I don’t need her to cry. Not yet at least.”

The kidnapper drops his hand and clenches his fists beside him. He wants to hit me. God knows what else.

“Where’s Mr. Black?” he asks, looking around the office.

“He left him behind,” I blurt out.

“You what?” Mr. Baines takes a step closer to him. “And Rebecca?”

“I didn’t leave them behind.” He shoots me another glare. This one is scarier than the last. He so wants to kill me. He wants to shut me up so bad. I’m going to make him pay for scaring me in the car.

“He did, too. I told him to stop, but he kept driving. He was too scared to stop the car. I can’t really blame him, because I’d be scared if Mr. Black was after me too.” I glare right back at him and add a smirk for good measure.

Mr. Baines moves. In one quick motion he lands a blow to my kidnapper. I watch as the brute crumples to the floor, holding his nose. I momentarily feel a little pang of guilt, but it goes away quickly. Blood drips from his nose as he tries to cover it.

“You let him get away!” Mr. Baines bellows. He never does that, never loses his cool. In all the time I’ve worked for him, he’s never so much as raised his voice above a conversational tone.

I think he’s scared now, too. Good, they all should be.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Rebecca is dead, isn’t she?”

If I had to guess, I’d go with yes. I keep the thought to myself because he’s looking pissed about that. If he was so worried about her, why in the heck did he send her out after us?

“He let Mr. Black get away, definitely,” I interject. “And that’s not the worst part.”

Mr. Baines looks at me.

“She never shuts the hell up. *That’s* the worst part of this. It’s torture,” my kidnapper mumbles from the floor.

I don’t pay him any mind. I continue with my story now that I have Mr. Baines’s attention. “Anyway. Like I was saying before I was rudely interrupted, the *worst* part is that you made it personal now by taking me. Mr. Black isn’t going to appreciate that.”

Mr. Baines crosses his arms over his chest and scowls at me. “You made this mess, little girl. Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

He’s right. It is my mess. “I was trying to do my job. In fact, this is *your* fault for being so mean. I was so afraid of asking you a question that it caused this giant misunderstanding. Maybe you should lighten up a bit.” I know I should be scared, but what do I have to lose at this point? I’m dead if Jacob doesn’t save me. I might as well say exactly what’s on my mind.

Mr. Baines’s fuzzy dark eyebrows draw together. “How did you even get past the password?”

There’s no way in hell I’m giving my friend up. I bite my lip, not sure what to say.

Mr. Baines moves closer, his wide frame full of chained fury. “Oh, you can’t talk now? I can pry the words out of you.”

“I hacked it,” I blurt out. I don’t think he can prove I didn’t. He wouldn’t be asking me if he already knew the answer to it.

“You’re a liar.” He moves even closer.

I push myself back into the sofa, trying to get away from him. I don’t think I can take a hit like he gave the other man.

“Sir.” A few men I’ve never seen walk into the room. They are all dressed in black, too.

“What’s with all the black?” My voice is high and thin, the bravado fading. “Is that like the bad guy color? Are they uniforms?”

“Shut up,” the man on the floor says as he tries to get up. Mr. Baines kicks him, knocking him back onto the ground. He cries out and grabs his side.

“Sir, someone’s in the building.”

He’s here. I never had a doubt that he would come for me.

“Fuck.” Mr. Baines’s whole body goes rigid. “Why are you just standing here? I want him dead!”

The black-clad men take off out of the room.

He turns to me and fists the front of my shirt as I try to scramble away from him. “You downloaded everything. I want it back. Where is it? Tell me now or I’ll kill you with my bare hands!”

“I don’t have it. Mr. Black does!” I lie. It was in my bag, but the past few times I dug around in there, I didn’t feel the USB. I guess it’s still there? He yanks me up, then stops when gunfire rings out.

My eyes burn with tears as he drops me back onto the sofa.
Jacob, please be okay.

“Let me go after him, sir.”

Mr. Baines doesn’t even bother to answer my kidnapper. He simply pulls out a gun and shoots him right in the head.

I let out a scream before covering my mouth with my hand. He points the gun at me next. I thought I would cry or beg for my life, but I don’t do either of those things. A strange calmness comes over me. Sure, I’m more than terrified, but knowing that Jacob is in the building gives me a sense of hope.

There also remains the tiny fact that Mr. Baines doesn’t know for sure where I stowed the information. It’s the only thing currently keeping me alive.

JACOB

I spit blood from my mouth and trudge past the black-clad bodies by the elevator bank. The guard in the parking garage gave me the most trouble. Not wanting to waste the bullet or alert the building, I did him with my fists. But he was a bruiser in his own right. Dead now, though. Just like everyone else here who helped take Margaret away from me. Grabbing the nearest guy's gun, I check the chamber, then continue moving.

The floor is quiet, seemingly empty, as I stalk toward Mr. Baines's office. But I know they're here. Idiots who think they can stop me. No one has ever been able to so much as slow me down, not until Margaret. And for her, I'll drop as many bodies as necessary to make sure she's safe.

As I round the corner into the cushier section of office space, someone throws a flashbang. I manage to close my eyes, but only after I get a peek at the blinding white light. Fuck.

I duck back behind the corner as slugs begin to pepper the wall. I can barely hear the shots over the ringing in my ears. I hate flashbangs. It's a douche weapon wielded by cowards who don't want to fight fair. Not that it matters. These idiots are already dead.

Pressing one hand to the wall, I close my eyes, ignore the ringing in my ears, and focus on the feel beneath my feet and my palm. I level the pistol at the drywall and wait. If they were smart, they would've rushed me by now. But they're scared. Of me. Good. Fear creates mistakes.

So I wait. It doesn't take long. The faintest vibrations telegraph through the soles of my feet and against the nerves in my hand. They're coming. I can't tell how many, but they're creeping down the hall.

I don't move. A spider knows the tastiest prey is the one you wait for, the one you savor, the one you drain dry and leave spinning—and the one that never saw you coming.

I breathe out slowly, my breath silent as I remain completely still. When the vibrations tell me what I need to know, I fire, each round cutting through two sheets of drywall before embedding in the bodies on the other side. Backing away, I spray the wall again as cries and groans of pain sound. The ringing in my ears has lessened, and I can see again. When I pop my head around the corner, then back, I get a glimpse of three men down. There are at least two more somewhere ahead.

Darting around the corner, I put a bullet in each of their heads, then jump into the nearest office as more gunshots ring out. Searing pain rockets from my thigh, and I realize I'm hit. The blood is already running from the wound on the outside of my leg, but it's not bad. Nothing I haven't had before. It won't slow me down.

"Mr. Black." Baines's voice sounds through the speakers of all the phones in the office. "While I'm glad to have you back in the fold, I'm afraid this wasn't how I envisioned your return."

"Let her go," I yell.

"And then you'll let me live?" he counters. Baines knows me too well. There's no way I'll let him walk out of his office alive, much less this building.

He sighs. "I didn't think so. So we're at an impasse. I'd also like to add that the agreement we had? It's over now. Your remaining cousin is fair game. In fact, I've already dispatched a group of assassins."

"You won't find him." I smile, the expression so new for me. I have Margaret to thank for it. Smiling had been foreign to me for a long time, until her. "He's gone to ground. I warned him

the moment you made the mistake of putting a hit on Margaret.”

“Perhaps. Even so, my men will enjoy their trip to the Bahamas. Eleuthera, I believe is the island they’re visiting. A resort. Moonlight Cay, perhaps was its name?”

I grit my teeth. Of course Evan decided to hide in plain sight on a sunny beach, probably drinking like a fucking fish and paying no attention to the killers coming after him. If he makes it out of this alive, I’m going to kill him.

“I can call them off,” Mr. Baines cajoles. “But you’ll have to agree that Margaret be eliminated.”

“No.” I can’t stop myself from yelling that word.

“So your cousin, then?”

“Fuck you.” I stride to the phone, pick up the receiver, knocking Baines off the line, then dial Evan’s burner phone.

“Evan’s Breast Massage Service, how can I serve you?” He answers with a hiccup.

“Your old boss is sending men to kill you. Hide. Now. I’ll be there soon.”

“What the—”

I slam the phone down, then drop to the floor as slugs tear through the wall and shred the desk where I’d just been standing.

“That’s cheating,” Mr. Baines calls.

I return fire, then army crawl into the hallway and take out the knees of one guy. Another dives into an office a few doors down. Margaret’s desk sits at the end of the corridor, right in front of Mr. Baines’s oversized doors.

The man on the ground still tries to shoot me. I pop him in the head and heart as I stride past, then jump and roll, landing in the office doorway where I kill the final security guy with an easy headshot. I keep going into the office and examine him, his body armor intact though his head is half blown away.

“You’re taking this too far, Mr. Black. It doesn’t have to be this way.” His voice is a little higher, his heart rate probably just a notch below a stroke.

“It’s just you and me,” I call as I re-enter the hallway and take cover behind Margaret’s desk. “Let her go.”

“What do I get in exchange?” he yells through the glass and wood.

A quick death. That’s the truthful answer. I don’t respond.

“You want to play this the hard way?” Panic creeps into his voice.

A scream rips from Margaret, and my blood rises like boiling lava.

“We can do that. I’ll make it simple. You kill me, I’m taking her with me.”

“Jacob!” Margaret cries.

I won’t let him hurt her.

With a burst of speed, I race to his door and bust the lock with my shoulder. I barrel inside and find Margaret in his grip, his gun leveled at me.

Then he fires a shot right into my chest.

My beautiful woman screams in terror as I feel the impact, the pain.

Then I go down. Hard.

MARGARET

I throw myself at Mr. Baines as he stalks past me. Clinging to his back, anger and sadness are the only things I feel as I let loose on him. I put everything I can into each blow that I land. My hands are already starting to throb. I hear his gun hit the floor as I scratch my nails across the back of his head.

“You stupid bitch!” He tries to pull me off his back, but I sink my fingers into his hair, digging my nails in and holding on tight. If he tries to pull me off, he’s going to take a chunk of his hair with him. The need to cause him as much pain as possible courses through my veins.

“You killed him.” I bring my knee back, trying to hurt him more. All the air leaves my lungs when he backs up and slams me into a wall. But I don’t let go. There’s nothing he can do to me now that will hurt more than what he’s already done.

With that one shot, he took away the only man that I ever loved. I pull harder, and he screams in pain. The only other thing I can think to do is bite him or claw his eyes out.

I remove one hand from his hair to grab the front of his face. I sink my nails in as deep as I can before I open my mouth to bite his shoulder. He may kill me in the end, but I’m not going down without a fight. The marks I plan to leave will last him a lifetime.

“Don’t bite him.” I jerk my head to see Jacob standing there with a gun pointed at Mr. Baines. My heart leaps at the sight of

him, and my eyes fill with tears. “I don’t want your mouth on him.”

“Get her the fuck off me.” He tries to slam me into the wall again but Jacob fires a shot into his leg, making him fall to his knees. I release his hair and let my nails drag across his face as I pull away from him.

“Jacob.” I let my eyes roam all over him. I don’t see blood anywhere. I know he was shot. I saw the bullet hit him right in the chest. I’d watched as he hit the floor.

“Come here, babe.”

I step around Mr. Baines and run over to Jacob. I jump into his arms and bury my face into his neck. He lets out a grunt. I breathe in his scent, letting it comfort me. He’s okay, and I’m back in his arms. I *knew* he’d save me.

“Sorry,” I say but don’t let him go. I look behind me to see Mr. Baines is still on his knees. Jacob has the gun trained on his head. “Make him call off his dogs. Your cousin’s in danger,” I remind him. I think that’s what I overheard.

“He knows he’s dead either way. Don’t you, Baines?”

“Fuck you.” He presses his hand to his wounded leg.

Rage still runs roughshod through me, and I practically spit Baines’s own threat back at him. “We can make it painless, or we can make you cry like a stupid bitch all night.”

Jacob throws back his head and laughs. His whole body shakes with it.

I smile up at him. “I told you I’d get you to laugh. Not that what I said was a joke,” I quickly add. “We will kill a motherfucker. Really meanly.” I give a definitive nod.

“Your claws are out.” Jacob keeps his eyes on Baines but leans closer to nip at my ear. “And I like it.”

My insides turn to jelly, my emotions all over the place. I love him so much that I can barely breathe. I slide down his body until my feet hit the floor.

“You’re calling the shots, babe.”

“He’s a bad man.” I turn to face Mr. Baines. “I saw all the people you killed.”

“Don’t judge me when you’re standing next to the most ruthless killer of all. You don’t think Mr. Black helped me with that list?”

I feel Jacob go stiff against me. I shrug. Maybe I should care. But Jacob saved me. I might be naïve to think it, but I don’t believe Jacob would kill someone that didn’t deserve it. It’s more likely that he got caught up in this life protecting his cousin. He might be a killer, but he’s a hero, too.

“I don’t care.” I lean into my man. “He’s *my* killer now.” In that moment, I realize Mr. Baines is going to die. Right here. Right now. No going back. He tried to kill Jacob. He sealed his fate. Plus, I don’t think Jacob would be too keen on the idea of letting him go. Not after he took me from him.

“I’ll make the call about your cousin.” He starts to reach into his pocket.

“Slow.” Jacob orders as he watches him pull the phone out and place the call.

“Cancel it all. Evan stays alive.” He drops the phone. “Jacob, I can make you a very rich man.”

“I’m already a rich man. And you can call me Mr. Black.”

“Rich? Really?” I look up at him. “Does killing people pay that well?”

He chuckles, his lips twitching into a smile. My insides tingle seeing him like this. I bite my lip. I want him so badly. My body craves him, the soft way he loves me and the hard way he fucks me.

“Not now, babe,” he growls.

“Right.” I shake the lust out of my eyes and turn back around. “We’re murdering people. No thinking about sex. No sex. Not even a little. No way. Just the murder. That’s it.” I slice my hand through the air.

“You’re throwing everything away for a woman? For a stupid piece of ass that you could get anywhere, anytime?” Mr.

Baines shouts. His hands are clenched at his sides. Blood is starting to pool around him from the wound in his leg.

I try not to gag. God, I hate blood. This is why I would never be able to kill anyone. Well, I guess I could poison them. That would be better. No blood. And somehow it seems ... nicer?

“Not a woman. *My* woman. You tried to take her from me. Did you really think I’d let you live?” Jacob fires the gun, and a bullet hits Baines right between the eyes. He falls backwards. Jacob spins me toward him before I can see any of the blood.

“Are you okay?” His hands are all over me.

I giggle on accident. “That tickles. I’m fine. I mean, I’m tired, scared, mad, laughing inappropriately, and in love all at once. But I’m fine.”

He wraps his arm around my waist and lifts me off my feet to kiss me. My eyes fall closed as I kiss him back. Another shot rings out in the room. I jerk back from the kiss. Jacob lowers his gun. Mr. Baines’s son-in-law lies dead on the floor. He must’ve been hiding in Mr. Baines’s gold plated bathroom.

“I never liked him. He cheats on his wife, beats her, too. No respect for women.”

“Then he definitely deserved to die.” I nod.

“Let’s get out of here. We need to get Bernie and Wally.” He puts me back down on the ground and takes my hand. “Can we stop and get McDonalds?” I ask when he pulls me onto the elevator.

“You didn’t like what I cooked you at the cabin?”

“I didn’t say that.” I smack his chest. “I hear you can afford to splurge anyway,” I tease him, making him laugh again. I grab his shirt, pulling him down to me. That’s when I realize he has a bulletproof vest on. My man is smart. He’s always a step ahead of everyone. No wonder all of them feared him.

“I love you, Jacob.”

“I love you, too.” He kisses me again as I hear the elevator ding. The gun goes off again. This time, I don’t jump. I just

step over the guard's body, making sure I don't get blood on my shoes as we make our getaway.

EPILOGUE

JACOB

5 years later

“*W*hy is there so much blood, though?” Margaret puts the back of her hand to her mouth and stifles a gag.

“What?” Petunia looks up from her doll.

“I just don’t think that’s necessary, you know?” Margaret rubs her baby bump. “I mean, that can’t be good for Ken or Barbie or any of the people here. It’s just so, gruesome. Can we redo this without all the red—”

“Ketchup, Mommy.” Petunia taps her finger in the tomato mess and licks the tip.

Margaret looks close to fainting, so I step in and wrap my arm around her waist.

“Daddy! Look!” Petunia points to her operating table. “I saved them!”

I consider the table full of dolls covered in ketchup. “You mean they’re alive? They seem to have lost a lot of blood.”

“Too much.” Margaret turns to me and buries her face in my shirt.

“Just ketchup, babe.”

“No, it’s blood.” Petunia nods and adjusts her little glasses with her non-ketchupy hand. “But that’s part of being a doctor, okay? Mommy, we have to be tough. Right, Daddy?”

“Oh, Mommy’s plenty tough. I promise you that.” I lean down and kiss the top of Petunia’s head. “You keep playing. Uncle Evan should be here any minute. I’m going to take Mommy for a rest.”

“Okay. I’ll keep saving lives.” She grabs her butter knife and starts to poke at Ken’s red abdomen.

Pulling Margaret away, I lead her to our bedroom. The two wide doors are open and give a view of the sparkling turquoise waters off the coast of a small island in the Bahamas.

“This is a much better look.” Margaret breathes deeply in the ocean air as I sit her on the bed and ease her back. “I hope she grows out of this ‘want to be a surgeon’ thing.”

Bernie sits on his fluffy bed in the corner with Wally, the somewhat charred pandacorn, snuggled next to him. They’re sleeping buddies. As I look closer, I notice something a little off. “Is Bernie wet?”

Margaret laughs. “While you were out fishing with Mrs. Winston, Petunia decided Bernie needed surgery more than her dolls, so he got the ketchup treatment first. I had to chase him down and give him a bath. Then when I got back, she’d opened her operating shop and used the entire bottle of bloo—I mean, ketchup.”

“At least she saves lives instead of taking them,” I offer.

She raises an eyebrow. “I don’t see those dolls coming back from the surgery, to be honest. You may be Mr. Black, but our daughter is the Deadly Florence Nightingale.”

“Fair point. How are you feeling besides that?” I pull off her fuzzy house shoes and start to rub her feet.

“I’m huge and grumpy and uncomfortable and—Ohhhhh.” Her moan of pleasure goes straight to my cock. “I’m suddenly feeling much better. Don’t stop.”

“Never.” I keep rubbing her swollen feet until my fingers venture higher, massaging her calves until I get to her knees.

She giggles, but I see when she spreads her legs just a little. A hint for me. One I don’t ignore. I climb onto the bed and push

her dress up to her round belly.

“Jacob.” She grabs my hair as I pull her panties to the side and lick up her slit. Her hips jerk. “Petunia—”

“Is busy with her patients,” I finish for her. “Now it’s time for you to get the care you need.” I lick her hot flesh, her pussy nice and juicy as I suck and tease her clit. When she’s pregnant, I can’t get enough of her. Fuck, that’s true even when she’s not carrying my baby. I delve my tongue inside her, and her shaking sigh is deep and sexy.

Returning to her clit, I suck it between my teeth as she moves her hips against my mouth.

I get onto my knees, then reach down and free my cock. “You’re going to need the full treatment today, babe.”

“Well, if that’s what the doctor suggests.” She reaches down and pulls at her panties. I take them off and toss them.

When I push inside her, filling her completely, she arches for me, and I yank down the top of her dress. Her tits are so plump, the nipples dark purple and demanding attention.

I fuck her gently and suck her tits. When I taste the milk on my tongue, my hips move harder, faster. There’s something so primal about this, about her body giving everything it has for us, for our children.

Reaching up, I pinch her stiff tip, and milk squirts onto my face. I lick it, then kiss up to her mouth. Keeping myself in a plank position, I fuck her as I tongue her delicious mouth.

She moans and spreads wider, her hips already moving erratically. She’s so sensitive now. It doesn’t take much to send her over. I don’t stop giving her what she needs until she bites my bottom lip, then comes with a low moan, her body locked around mine as her pussy spasms. I shove as deep as I can and spill, showing her how much I love her pregnant body.

When we can finally breathe again, I drop to her side and reach up to smooth the damp hair from her forehead. Then I rest my hand around her breast, the nipple still puckered.

“I’ll never get tired of this view.” I knead her tit, the weight perfect in my hand.

“The Bahamas are definitely beautiful,” she teases.

“You, babe. It’s you. It’s always been you and will *always be* you.” I kiss her neck below her ear.

“The couple that kills together—”

“Stays together.” I growl as I get hard again. “And you’re staying right here.” I reach down and press my fingers inside her, feeling our mutual wetness as I pull out and stroke her clit.

“Jacob.” She grips the sheets. “You’re a bad man.”

“You can call me Mr. Black, because I’m about to slay that pussy.”

She giggles as I roll her onto her side and enter her from behind, fucking her sweet and hard and everything in between. Because I’ll always give her what she needs, and she’ll always be the one who brought me to life.

ALSO BY MINK

Her Christmas Spy

He's been sent to ruin Christmas. She's not going to let that happen, and she may just fall in love along the way.

Unexpected Love

He's the Butcher. He spills blood for a living and enjoys every second. She's a sheltered mafia princess, one who sees him for more than his violence. But can love bloom between such different souls? (Hint: Totes.)

Unexpected Queen

He doesn't expect love when he marries the woman he's betrothed to. Until he sees her and realizes she's the reason for everything he'll ever do.

Protecting Zoe

He's a hardened mafia kingpin. She's an innocent woman caught in the crossfire. He saves her life, but he wants more than a simple thank you in return ...

Guardian's Obsession

He's in charge of her inheritance, but he wants to be in charge of her heart, soul, and her wicked curves.

Rebel Tempts the Beast

As one of the biggest players in the Yakuza, I do my duty and rule my syndicate with a hard but fair fist. I follow my own rules and adhere to my own sense of duty.

Until Mei.

When my mentor sends his daughter to live with me and instructs me to put her on the correct path, I try to use a strong hand to guide her. But that hand tends to gravitate to her rear end, especially when Mei runs her smart mouth. She's young, fiery, and looking for love.

Though I follow strict rules and enforce them in my life, Mei bucks them with ease. She's a little rebel, one I never want to break. In fact, I fall for her just the way she is. She's the one I never saw coming, and the one I can't live without.

When an enemy sees an opening and tries to use her against me, I'll burn his lineage to the ground and salt the earth behind me. For Mei. For our future. For our family.

Treasured

He's an art thief. She's a mafia man's daughter. She's also kinda clumsy ... With broken ancient vases and a grumpy hero turned mushy for his woman, these two are a perfect match.

Christmas Crush & Christmas Grump

This Christmas in Reindeer Valley is sure to steam up your Kindle. A second chance romance plus a grumpy/sunshine romance all set in the same small town? Sign me up!

Married to My Stalker

He's so obsessed with her that he wifes her stat. But when she starts to figure out his dark side, she realizes she wants it to come out and play ... dirty.

Plump

He's a mafia boss. She's *plump*.

Obsessed Love

He's fresh out of prison. She pulls him over. So, naturally, he puts her in his trunk and takes her home to make her the queen of his illegal empire. Nice.

Crazy Love

He has a screw loose because of a head injury a while back. But he still knows his true love when he sees her. If only her mouthy cat—whom he can hear—would stop distracting him with all its sassy comebacks!

Claiming His Kitten

He wants her father's fortune and will go to any lengths to steal it out from under her. But, let's be honest, he's kidding himself. What he really wants is *her*.

Vetting His Kitten

A bad man who goes all warm and cuddly for his one true love. Gaaaahhhh, I love this one!

Wrecked

He knows how to fight, but can he learn to protect the one woman who's ever made him feel hope?

Nanny Tempts the Beast

She needs a job. He needs a nanny. And then he needs only *her*.

Unforgettable

Amnesia romance with a sassy kitty and a tantalizing mystery? What's more MINK than that?

Bodyguard's Obsession

He's supposed to protect her, but he ends up needing to stay *very* close to her. For, ya know, *safety*. *wink wink*

His Clever Kitten

She takes him hostage to save her kitty cat shop. It just so happens he's a mafia boss who'll do anything to stay locked up tight just for her.

His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when he can't keep his eyes off his client.

119 Kitty Lane

MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.

Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of Christmas cheer.

Taming His Bride

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Stealing His Bride

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Claiming His Bride

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Knocking Up His Bride

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

Under His Spell

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right reasons.

Beauty Tempts the Beast

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

Loan Shark's Obsession

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

His Stolen Bride

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

His Stolen Princess

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

Stalking Her Sweetly

Who's stalking whom?

Hitman's Heart

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

His Secret Treasure

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

My Hero's Secret Baby

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

His Tiger Queen

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

His Virgin Heiress

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

Cuffed Love

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

Stuffed

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

His Sweetest Sin

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

Locking Her Down

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

Marco's Girl

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

Pop-up Love

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

Beauty and the Boss

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

His Virgin Queen

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey.

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

www.MINKromance.com

[Sign up for MINK's newsletter.](#)

[Join MINK's Reader Group, Smitten Kittens, on Facebook!](#)

