



DARE TO LIVE

CHURCHILL BRADLEY ACADEMY BOOK FOUR



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DARE TO LIVE

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DEDICATION

Are we sorry we made you cry? Nope.

To endless hours of writing and messaging back and forth.
A huge thank you to all the alpha readers and the pain we put
them through. More thanks to the ARC readers, who had no
idea how shattered and speechless this series would leave
them.

This is for the gray-eyed boy.

The knight who fell.

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DEAR READER

This is a dark high school bully romance.

You've come this far and been brave enough to continue.
Monsters stir once again in the halls of Churchill Bradley
Academy. The school echoes with tragedy, heartache, and
torment.

Can a monster find redemption and forgiveness in the
darkness?

Come play in the dark one last time.

Red or green, dear reader?

CHAPTER 1

ARABELLA

Ignoring the low buzz of chatter in the art gallery around me, I remain where I am, staring at the painting on the wall. My gaze moves over the canvas, trying to decipher the story woven into the imagery. There's a blonde-haired woman with flowing hair standing with her back to me, naked in a field of black roses. The sky is dark with stormy gray clouds. Half-formed, disfigured faces peek from the swirling storm, their attention on the figure below. It fascinates and repels me with its hints of monsters and death.

"It has a very grim quality." A familiar voice murmurs in my ear.

"Macabre," I reply, smiling.

"Positively ghoulish."

"Gothic."

He hums in agreement. "And a money maker. This just sold for fifty thousand dollars."

I turn to look at my best friend, Miles Cavanaugh. He's studying the painting beside me. His brown hair has been cut into short choppy curls and is less wild than how he'd worn it when we were younger. He's also better dressed, in a sharp black suit, which shows off his athletic build.

"For one painting?"

Miles nods, his eyes meeting mine. “I was there when Ivan took the check.”

Ivan is his fiancé, who also happens to own the gallery.

I almost declined the invitation to come to the exclusive showing tonight. Ivan has been talking about it for weeks, and his excitement over being able to display ‘never-seen-before’ art pieces had eventually made me change my mind. All I know about the artist is that everyone wants one of his paintings.

Standing here, looking at the detail and depth of the imagery, it’s not hard to figure out why his work is so sought after.

Accepting the flute of champagne Miles hands me, I toy with the elegant stem. “That’s going to be one happy artist. Do you have any idea who he is?”

Miles shrugs. “Ivan didn’t say. Apparently, there’s a huge mystery behind the name, or something. The artist doesn’t do public appearances. I think that’s why Ivan was so excited to get his hands on this collection to exhibit and sell.”

He sweeps me with a gaze from head to foot, taking in my long blonde hair brushed to a shine, along with the figure-hugging red dress and the matching heels I’m wearing.

“Changing the subject, entirely, you look positively stunning this evening, Bella. Did you bring a date?”

I shake my head at the hopeful note in his tone and lift the

glass to my lips. "I'm not seeing anyone at the moment. I don't have time."

"You are always doing something."

I shrug lightly. "I like to keep busy."

"That's a trauma response, so you don't need to stop and think."

Rolling my eyes, I groan. "Miles, you promised you wouldn't psychoanalyze me if I came to the event."

"I'm sorry. I've been talking to a new therapist. She's helping me a lot with what happened at school."

"I'm glad." My voice is clipped, my defenses automatically rising at his mention of the past.

I don't want to remember Churchill Bradley Academy tonight. I'm plagued with enough nightmares when I sleep. Dreams which leave me choking and shaking when I wake.

He studies my face. "I could give you her number?"

"No thanks." Taking another sip of my champagne, I let the bubbles tickle my throat on the way down.

"You can't keep living in the past."

"I'm not."

"You will have to learn to trust someone other than me at some point."

Why is he dragging all this back up now? We survived something terrible when we were eighteen. Something that has

left us both changed.

One year at that school shaped who I am today. The things that happened left cracks and splits inside me that have never fully healed. Ten years on, and I *still* have scars—both physical and mental.

“Miles—”

“Remind me how many relationships you’ve been in since you moved to L.A.”

My free hand moves to touch the small padlock pendant on the chain around my neck that I never take off, my fingertips caressing the metal. “Two.”

“And how long did they last?” His voice is soft and gentle.

“A couple of months.”

“You are an incredibly beautiful woman, Arabella. I hate seeing you alone.”

I let my hand drop from my neck. There’s a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Miles is on a mission. He does this sometimes. Tries to use whatever his therapist is telling him on me.

I glance around at elegantly dressed people chatting and moving from painting to painting.

“Please don’t tell me you invited me here this evening for a blind date.” My voice is light, but if he admits he has, I’m going to kill him.

Miles chuckles. “No, but Ivan has a friend who would be perfect for you.”

I discard my drink on an empty tray as a server passes us and take a step away from my friend. “I’m not interested.”

“Bella, you’re twenty-eight.” He touches my arm, preventing my escape. “You should be enjoying life.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“Is my fiancé causing a scene?”

Relief courses through me at the interruption, and I turn to find Ivan watching us, an amused gleam in his eyes.

“He’s decided to nag me over my single status, again.”

“Miles.” The older dark-haired man rumbles something in Russian.

My best friend’s face flushes red at whatever he said.

“Arabella should be madly in love. Not all alone.”

“Behave.” Ivan gives his lover a warning look. “Bella, you should let me display the stained glass you create. I would be honored to have it here for everyone to see.”

I accept his arm when he offers it to me, happy for the change in conversation. “No, it’s just a hobby. I don’t do it for other people to see.”

He pats my hand. “The pieces I saw were exquisite. You’d have buyers climbing over each other to own one.”

“No one is supposed to know they exist.”

I worked on them in the spare room in my apartment. Whenever Miles came over, I made sure the door was shut so he wouldn't see them. I didn't want to set off any triggers he might have from our shared past.

But Ivan was nosy ... curious about why I kept the door locked. His persistence finally drove me to show him. He'd walked around, examining the way the molten colors of the stained glass poured on the floor through the light of the window, and declared that one day he would convince me to display them.

My obsession with the glass consumes a lot of my spare time. I can sit and stare at my creations for hours, getting lost in my thoughts. I am fascinated by how the changing weather can affect the shards, turning them from something bright and cheerful to something somber and melancholy. The beauty haunts me with tragic images seared into my brain from ten years ago. Yet still, I'm drawn to create them.

"One day, I will convince you." Ivan disrupts my thoughts.

I shake my head. "I'm not interested in having them displayed. You know that."

Miles pulls a face. "I find them disturbing. I'm not sure how you can make them at all. It's morbid and morose."

Do they bring the demons he lives with closer to the surface? Do the colors of the glass stir the trauma from when we lost a loved one?

We both wear our scars differently.

“I won’t push,” Ivan’s voice holds a note of disappointment. “But the offer is open.” He smiles then, and his tone changes, becomes brighter. “That wasn’t the reason I came over. I want you both to come with me and take a look at the artist’s private collection. He allows it to be displayed, but refuses to sell any of the pieces, no matter how much he is offered for them. They are exquisite and ...” Something crosses his expression, gone before I can identify it. “Well, come and see for yourself.”

I let him lead me away from the painting. “They aren’t being sold?”

“No, as I said, the artist refuses to part with them. I think you will find them very interesting. I know I do.”

Miles keeps pace with us. “I didn’t know there was another part of the exhibition.”

Ivan’s smile is indulgent. “I decided to put this display in a separate room. I haven’t opened the doors to our guests yet. I wanted you to see them first.”

A few of the patrons glance our way, calling out greetings to Ivan. He acknowledges them with a few words and a nod of his head but doesn’t stop to chat. The room he takes us to is on the other side of the gallery. He hesitates for a second, one hand resting against the handle, and looks back at me.

“I would be very interested in your thoughts on these,” he says, and opens the door.

When I step inside, my attention goes immediately to the paintings hanging on the walls. I expect to see something

visceral and macabre like the rest of the artwork on display. Instead, the past I've been living in the shadow of comes rushing back, hitting me full force.

I stare at the image of the boy on the canvas. His messy hair and laughing gray eyes. That ever-present smile that suggested everything around him was there purely to entertain him. A boy who'd been my friend. The drawing is so raw and real, I half expect him to turn his head and wink at me.

Emotions hit me hard. My throat is tight, tears are burning like acid at the backs of my eyes.

Miles inhales sharply beside me. "Oh my god, that's—"

"Kellan." I finish for him.

My gaze jerks to the next painting. This one is of an eighteen-year-old girl. She's sitting on a wooden bench, a book in her lap, her expression amused as she watches something out of view.

Zoey.

I can't look away.

I sway, clutching at the padlock around my neck. The third piece of art fills my vision.

My face, only it's ten years younger. I'm reaching up, skin flushed with color, lips parted, and eyes still heavy from post-orgasmic bliss. The bruises and teeth marks on my neck and shoulder are dark against my pale skin.

My monster.

These are Eli's. How are they here? Why are they here?

Ivan frowns down at me. "Are you okay? You're as pale as a ghost."

All the emotion of a minute ago slips away, leaving me numb.

"I need to go." My voice is shaky.

He turns as I push past him, his expression morphing from concern to confusion.

"Wait. Bella?" He reaches out and catches my arm. "I thought you might know the artist as you're featured in his work."

"Who is he?" *I know who he is.* "What is his name?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. He sells under the name Sin."

The lump in my throat returns.

I have to get out of here.

"Do you know him, Bella?"

The smile I pin to my mouth feels stiff and fake on my face. "I used to, but not anymore. Thank you for inviting me."

"Wait—"

"Ivan, let her go." Miles' voice sounds just as shell-shocked as I feel. "Oh god, you should have shown me these before—"

I don't catch the rest of the conversation as I hurry from the

room. Pushing my way through the crowd, I make my way toward the main doors. My hand is pressed to my stomach. My head is spinning with unwanted memories.

Blood, so much blood. The monster in the dark reaches for me, and I scream and scream and scream.

CHAPTER 2

ELI

I dust the snow from my legs and stamp my feet before stepping inside. Just a quick trip to the woodshed and back has me covered in the stuff. Thankfully, I had the foresight to take something to cover the wood, so it didn't get wet on the way back, so it wasn't a complete waste of time.

Once inside, I close the door and turn the lock, then glance over at the painting on the wall.

"Yeah, yeah. I know I should have done it earlier today. I was busy, okay?"

The painting doesn't answer me, but the laughter in the boy's eyes says everything without words anyway.

"It's not fucking funny. Stop laughing or I will throw out your ashes." My gaze shifts from the painting to the crystal raven sitting on the mantelpiece. Its wings are outstretched, as though the bird is ready to take off, and the color inside shifts from blue to black to purple, depending how the light hits. I stroke a finger over it. Kellan's ashes are inside. A gift given to me a couple of weeks after his funeral.

Crouching, I place the logs into the grate, stack the remainder on the rack to one side of it, then light the fire. I lean back on my haunches and watch as the flames lick over the logs, then stand and stretch.

“It’s going to be cold tonight. I’m thinking of having stew for dinner, how about you?”

Neither the raven nor the painting reply. Which is a good thing; otherwise, I’d have to believe I was going crazy, like my stepmom keeps claiming. Stripping out of my jacket, I hang it on the door, then move into the kitchen so I can throw open the freezer and see what’s inside.

There *should* be stew. I’m pretty sure Roger brought some on his last trip up. I rummage through the sealed Tupperware containers until I find one with the words I want on it.

Bingo.

Studying the instructions, I peel off the lid and pop it into the microwave, then spin the dial until it matches the purple color on the label. I hit start and leave that to cook and turn my attention to the coffeemaker.

By the time I’ve laid out a plate and silverware on a tray and found a clean mug, the microwave has finished, and the coffee is bubbling away. I dish out my food, fill my mug and retreat into the living room. The fire has done its job and heated the room nicely. I settle the fire box in front of the naked flame to direct the heat up to the vents, so the rest of the cabin will warm up.

When I’d made the decision to move in here permanently after Dad died, I’d spent six months and thousands of dollars extending and adapting. I have my own electricity source powered through much stronger generators than we used to

have and built an art studio and a fully kitted out gym as separate buildings, as well as added three additional rooms to the main cabin. If I really wanted to, I could get rid of the old fireplace and just use the electricity to heat up the cabin, but I like the way the fire makes me feel, so prefer to use that instead of the top-range heating system I've had installed. It's not like there's anyone else here, and I don't feel the cold all that much.

I've lived here for five years. When I first moved in, and the work was being completed, I had to make regular trips into the nearest town, which I hated. Eventually, I found and hired a local man, Roger, who deals with anything that requires a trip into the town, and his wife, Adaline, who cooks meals for me, which get delivered once every couple of weeks.

My cell's ringtone breaks the silence just as I'm mopping up the last bit of stew from my plate with a slice of bread, and I hit the connect button without looking. I don't need to, there are only two people who have the number.

"Eli. Are you coming home for Christmas?" Elena's voice sounds down the line.

"Didn't we have this conversation already?"

"I was hoping you'd change your mind. We could spend it in the Hamptons. It'd be nice."

The Hamptons is the last place I want to fucking go. I don't let my irritation at the idea sound in my voice.

"I can't. I have five pieces I need to finish for a show in

January. If I leave here, and then there's a blizzard which stops me from getting back, I won't have time to finish them."

Her sigh is soft. "Maybe that's a good thing. You shouldn't be stuck there alone all the time. When did you last speak to someone other than the ghosts in your head?"

"Ellie ..."

"Don't *Ellie* me! Maybe I should just come to you."

The image of her wading through the snow in her designer heels makes me laugh. We've reached a good place between us over the years, and I no longer view her as the money-hungry gold-digger I'd once thought. She stayed with my dad until the bitter end, clung to his hand and wept across his chest when he died.

It was only then I discovered that not only had she happily and willingly signed a post-nup agreement, but she'd also refused to let my dad add her to his will. When my father died, I inherited everything, other than a small monthly allowance he set aside for Arabella.

My jaw clenches. And *that* was going to take me down a memory lane I didn't want to visit.

"How about I send you tickets for the January showing? It's being held in New York."

"And you'll stay long enough to go for dinner with me?"

I roll my eyes. The last time I'd agreed to meet her, I said a quick hi at the showing, then hightailed it out of the place

before anyone saw me.

“Eli.”

“Don’t use your *mom* voice on me, Ellie. It doesn’t work.”

She laughs. “We both know it does. So, you’ll agree to dinner ... and maybe stay over for a day or two so I can make sure you’re not wasting away?”

I sigh. “You’re pushing it now.”

Her voice softens. “I worry about you. And Ar—”

“Please don’t.”

Some days I can handle hearing about her, most days I can’t. Today is one of those days.

CHAPTER 3

ARABELLA

“Excusez-moi, *Mademoiselle* Gray. What is this?”

I look up from my sewing machine at the sound of Marcel Allaire’s voice. He’s the Head Designer of the fashion house I work for, overseeing a team of six who make up samples of each design before they go for manufacture. Once he sees he has my attention, he gestures at the dress half-finished on the mannequin beside me.

I tuck a lock of stray blonde hair behind my ear. “It’s for the spring collection.”

His lips curl in displeasure. “Non, non, non. Look at the color, the cut. It is all wrong.”

“But I thought burnt orange was in for autumn?”

“This is far too dark.”

“Dark?” I repeat, staring at the fabric the rest of the team I’m with has been using.

“The whole thing is missing something.” he continues, eyeing my creation. “It does not work. Scrap it. Start again.”

My heart lurches at his words. “Very well, *Monsieur* Allaire.”

He hovers for a moment longer before turning on his heels and stalking away from my corner of the room, leaving a

cloud of expensive cologne behind. I grit my teeth to stop myself from saying something that would result in my losing my job and abandon the piece of clothing I'm working on.

My eyes are dry and tired, and I rub them, trying to ease the sting. I've been working hard on these designs and to be told I have to start again hurts.

Marcel has been on my back for weeks. I'm sure he stole some of my designs and passed them off as his own. When I complained to HR, they did nothing. I was given a verbal pat on the head for having a good eye and told not to make waves because catching Marcel Allaire's attention will be good for my career. Since then, the Frenchman has decided to make my life miserable.

Ten years ago, I thought I had everything worked out. Unfortunately, my twenty-year plan isn't going the way I hoped. The dream I had about becoming a fashion designer and traveling the world became tarnished and jaded over time. It's not how I expected it to be. I know it's also not helped by the trauma I lived through, which means I don't even like to leave my house if I don't have to.

"I don't know why you put up with him. You're way more talented than he is."

I shrug. "He's the big name. Not me."

Grace, the designer at the next table beside me, pulls a face. "He's an asshole."

I smile, but don't reply. It's almost lunchtime, and all I want

to do is escape the building for an hour. Casting a tired look at the cloth around me, I sigh and stand. Why wait for another ten minutes, I might as well take my break now.

“I’m going to grab a bite to eat.”

“I’ll come with you.” Grace’s voice is friendly and cheerful.

I’ve not made any overtures of friendship toward the other woman, but she hasn’t taken the hint that I’m not looking for a friend. She snatches up her purse and follows me.

When we reach the elevators in the hallway, she jabs the button. “There’s a new sushi bar we could try if you like? Or there’s a Mexican restaurant just down the block. I also know a little Italian place.”

My gaze remains fixed on the changing numbers on the screen. “I just want a sandwich and a coffee.”

The doors woosh open, and we both step inside, and I push the button for the ground floor. I’m thankful when she doesn’t start chatting. Shoving my hands in the pockets of my jacket, I stare ahead, watching the floor numbers count down, and ignore her. The last thing I want is company. I’m tired and irritable. Dreams of a dark-haired, green-eyed boy with tattoos, piercings, and a bad attitude, have plagued me for the last few days.

I haven’t seen Eli in five years, and although my mom talks about him from time to time, I’m not in his life anymore. His father left me an allowance when he died, giving me the funds to buy my own apartment, and my dreams of fashion design

fame. But ever since the recent gallery showing, I can't get him out of my mind.

I can almost pinpoint when things started to go wrong for us. My thoughts tumble back in time.

"Ari, where are you going?"

I stiffen and turn at Eli's voice. "Out."

He's standing on the stairs, staring at me, eyes intense. "Who with?"

"Garrett."

"Where?"

Swallowing hard, I tear my attention from the frown on his face. "Why do you need to know?"

He descends the steps, and moves in front of me, blocking my way to the front door. "I'm your boyfriend."

I cross my arms. "And?"

"Let me grab my keys, and I'll come with you."

"No."

That one word stops him in his tracks, and he turns back to me. "What do you mean no?"

I take a deep breath as my heart thumps painfully in my chest. "Eli, you're smothering me."

"Smothering you? What the fuck does that mean?"

"You're making me feel like a prisoner. You constantly need

to know where I am, who I am with, what I'm doing."

Tension creeps between us.

Eli tilts his head. "I'm just trying to keep you safe."

The door slides open, breaking the memory. I'd been eighteen, foolishly naïve and desperately in love with my Nasty Little Monster.

I leave the elevator and head across to the main doors of the building, not waiting for Grace.

"Miss Gray, these just arrived for you," one of the receptionists calls out as I pass.

Her voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I divert my path to the desk. Everything inside me turns to ice when I see the bouquet of white lilies wrapped in black paper. She lifts them up in her arms.

No. No. Not again. Why has he sent them to my workplace? How does he know where I work? Why can't he leave me alone?

An image of white lilies surrounding me, as my screams echo off the stone walls, flashes through my head.

"Oh wow," Grace breathes beside me. "They're beautiful. Who are they from?"

The receptionist smiles. "There's no note. You must have a mystery admirer! I wish someone would send me flowers."

It's hard to tear my gaze away from them, but I do,

swallowing hard as uneasiness worms its way through me.
“You can have them. I hate lilies.”

The other woman’s eyes widen. “What? Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Before she can say anymore, I walk away, my heels tapping on the marble floor.

Grace hurries after me. “I guess you’re not big into flowers, then?”

“No.” My voice is clipped, as I push through the door, and step outside into the warm L.A. winter.

CHAPTER 4

ELI

I step back from the easel and stare at the painting. The monster is clawing its way out of the abyss, its eyes feral and saliva dripping from its gaping maw. But there is something off about the image, and I can't figure out what is wrong.

My monster series is highly sought after, with every painting I showcase snapped up as soon as it goes on sale. I guess it speaks to the darkness that lurks inside people. My gaze moves over the lines, looking for the problem but I can't see it. I just *know* it's not right.

Maybe I should take a break and come back to it. The sun has set. I've been locked away in here since breakfast. I'll clear up and step away for the night, then look at it with fresh eyes in the morning.

As I turn to leave, my gaze falls onto the small marble sculpture sitting in the corner. The dust sheet that keeps it hidden from my sight has slipped, revealing part of it. I finished it over a year ago and my intention had been to add it to the rest of the private display I sent out with any event. It contains a set of paintings, sketches and sculptures from my childhood, and I get offers to buy them every single time. I don't know why I send them; I'm never going to sell them.

"It's your fault," I tell the boy in the painting beside the door. "You just want to be the center of attention everywhere

and this is your only way to accomplish it now.”

He grins back at me.

The painting is of him and three others. He’s sitting high up on the bleachers. A few rows in front of him and lower down, a girl and boy are sitting together. Her head is resting on the boy’s shoulder, and his arm is draped across her shoulders. A crumpled-up piece of paper is sailing through the air, on course to hit the boy’s head, while the one sitting alone laughs. On the far edge of the frame, a fourth boy stands with his back to the viewer. His head is turned slightly, looking at the girl.

I sigh. “I miss you, Kell. It should have been me.”

I tidy everything away, then walk over to the sculpture. My fingers brush over the bare shoulder, the arch of her neck, and hover over the blindfold covering her eyes. I hesitate, then shake my head and pull the dust sheet back into place, switch off the light and lock up the studio.

I take a few minutes to walk around the back of the cabin and check on the generators and water supply. The temperature has dropped since this morning and I’m pretty sure more snow is on the way. I’m not concerned, though. I have enough supplies to last me for three months if I do get snowed in. It just means I won’t get any new art to the showcase in January. Not that I care. It’s not like I need the money.

Once I’m back inside the cabin, I heat up something for dinner, then stretch out on the couch. Music plays softly

through the sound system, and I doze off, only to be awakened by my cell's ringtone sometime later.

“What?”

“That’s a lovely way to greet your stepmother.”

“Twice in a week, Ellie? That’s special, even for you. What’s wrong now?”

“Oh, someone’s feeling irritable today. *Nothing* is wrong. I just heard that there’s a blizzard heading your way and I wanted to check in with you.”

“I’m twenty-eight years old. You need to stop worrying about me. I’m a big boy, *Mom*.”

She laughs. “I really wish you’d come home for Christmas.”

“What’s the point? You’re in L.A. more than New York, anyway. Surely, you’re not planning to fly back to the house in the Hamptons just to spend Christmas with me.”

“I would, if I thought you’d join me.”

“I’d be terrible company and you’d miss out on all those parties you love so much.”

Her sigh is soft, and I immediately regret saying it.

“They’re not nearly as much fun without your dad.”

“I’m sorry, Ellie, I didn’t mean—”

“No, I know you didn’t. I just miss him. I think I’m going to go back to the house anyway if you don’t mind. I feel closer to him there.”

“You know you’re always welcome to go there. Hell, I’ll sign ownership over to you if you want it.”

“No. Elliot left the house to you. I don’t want it. I just like to visit sometimes.” She hesitates. “I was thinking ...”

Her tone of voice suggests I’m not going to like what she’s been thinking. When she carries on, I congratulate myself on guessing correctly.

“I will see if Arabella would like to spend Christmas with me. Would you mind?”

“Why would I?” I keep my voice light.

“Eli—”

“Ellie, it was ten years ago. We’ve both moved on since then. I don’t even remember the last time I saw her.”

That’s an outright lie. The last time I saw her was at my dad’s funeral, standing pale beside her mom in a somber black dress. She’d laid her hand on my arm and leaned up to kiss my cheek.

I’d told her to fuck off and walked away.

Yeah, not my best moment.

CHAPTER 5

ARABELLA

I unlock the front door of my apartment, go inside, and hit the buttons on the alarm console before it goes off. Kicking off my sneakers, I drop my gym bag down beside them. The sweat from my self-defense class has long dried on my skin, and my muscles ache from the intense session.

I drop my keys into the wooden bowl on the small table by the door and walk along the hallway into the living room. The silence engulfs me, prickling my nerves.

I hate it. It's just another reminder of how alone I am.

The TV remote is on the coffee table, so I snatch it up and switch on the television, just to have some background noise. A quick flick through the channels, and I find one with non-stop reruns of a sitcom I know well. Ten seasons and two hundred and thirty-six episodes to fill the emptiness of my apartment. The banter and familiar music settle over me like a favorite comforter and chase away the tension of the day.

I leave my jacket draped over the back of the couch and head for the bathroom. After a quick shower, I change into a comfy pair of yoga pants and a black hoodie. I rub the sleeve against my cheek. Sadness sweeps through me. It's the only piece of Eli I have, apart from the padlock necklace around my neck. Memories I try to keep buried rise.

Eli smiling up at me from his bed. His lips on my neck. His

hands on my body. The way he cradled me against his chest every single night we were together. Our laughter. His voice, a soothing husky whisper in my ear.

My Nasty Little Monster.

He'd marked me with his rough brand of loving, ruined me for anyone who came after, because no one else measured up. No one else could seduce me with their darkness the way he did.

He'd taken my first everything. Burrowed beneath my skin and into my chest, claimed my heart as his. And even though I walked away, he still owns it. I just don't like to admit it.

We'd been perfect together.

Until we weren't.

My cell rings, and I pluck it up off the couch where I tossed it, checking the caller ID before I answer. "Hey, Mom."

"How are you, sweetheart?" Her voice is warm.

"Busy as always." Wedging the phone between my shoulder and ear, I walk along the hallway to the spare bedroom and open the door.

"I'm going to go to the Hamptons for Christmas. I was hoping you'd join me?"

My heart stops for a second.

Eli will be there. There's a moment of temptation as I picture his face, his smile, the feel of his mouth on mine. But

then I remember the last time I saw him—at his father’s funeral, where he’d rejected me in front of all the mourners when I’d tried to comfort him.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to make it.” I flick on the light, and my gaze settles on the pools of rainbow colors spilling out from the stained-glass windows I have positioned around the room.

She sighs. “Well, you know where I’ll be if you change your mind.”

“I thought you’d be staying in New York with your friends. Don’t you usually have parties to attend?”

“I decided I wanted something quieter this year.”

Walking over to my workbench, I eye the half-finished piece on the smooth wooden surface. “There’s nothing wrong, is there?”

“No. No, of course not.”

My brows knit together. “You’d tell me if there was?”

“Of course, I would. I just miss having you and Eli around.”

A twinge of guilt jabs me. “I’ll come and see you at Easter, I promise.”

My mom is silent for a beat. “It would be nice to spend time with both of you.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but that isn’t possible.” Saying those words out loud causes a dull ache inside me. “We just didn’t

work out.”

“I know,” she replies softly. “After everything that happened, you had to deal with things in your own ways.”

My gaze moves over the image I’ve been putting together with the colored glass. A beautiful broken angel with wings spread and a handsome face looking up from the shadows where he dwells to the sky above.

“I’m not sure either of us ever got over it.” The buzz of my doorbell snaps me from my thoughts of Eli. “I have to go. There’s someone at the door.”

“I’ll give you a call in a few days.”

“You don’t need to keep checking up on me.”

She laughs. “Of course, I do. I’m your mother, and I’m not giving up on you coming to the Hamptons.”

I roll my eyes and smile. “Bye, Mom.”

I end the call, and hurry from the room to answer the door. A quick check through the peephole shows me a familiar face. I open the door.

“Miles, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to apologize for the other night, and for the way Ivan sprung those sketches on us.” He holds up the bottle in his hand. “I brought wine. Pinot Noir from Ivan’s collection.”

My brows raise, and I step back. “Come in.”

He waits until I’ve closed the door to speak again. “I’m

really sorry, Bella. If I'd had any idea, I would have warned you. I should have told you what the artist's name was sooner."

"And why didn't you?"

He looks at me for a long second. "Because I had no reason to. How was I to know that *Sin* was Eli?"

Sin.

I will myself not to react.

"I swear I didn't know ... not until we walked into that room."

I head to the kitchen to find some glasses. "I thought you'd told him about your past."

"Not in detail." He follows me. "Just that a couple of kids at our school died, and we knew the person responsible. He knows now. I told him everything, and he feels awful for surprising you with the artwork. He had this plan to get you to help him persuade Sin ... *Eli* ... to use his gallery exclusively for his exhibits. I love Ivan, but he can be a ruthless bastard when he wants something."

"It's fine. I hope you explained that Eli and I aren't close anymore."

Miles pulls out a chair at my kitchen table, sits, and accepts the corkscrew I hand him. "We both know it's not fine. You almost died, Bella."

I take two glasses down from one of the cabinets and join

him. “I received a bouquet of lilies today. That’s six years in a row.”

Six years of taunting at random moments in my life. Of not letting me forget the horror I’d lived through.

“Evan Ridley is locked up in a psychiatric prison.” He pops the cork from the wine bottle and pours the dark red liquid into our glasses.

“But this one was sent to my workplace and not my apartment.”

“He can’t hurt you anymore.”

I smile tightly. “No, he just likes to remind me that he’s still thinking about me.”

The psychopath had been caught, but it didn’t repair the damage he’d already done. He poisoned my life. Turned happiness into discontent.

Sipping his wine, Miles eyes me thoughtfully. “What are you doing for Christmas?”

I shrug. “I thought I would stay home and watch old Christmas movies.”

“You mean become a hermit and live on the contents of your refrigerator while you obsess over those cold-colored pieces of glass.”

“My mother invited me to the Hamptons, but I declined.”

“You are not staying here alone. Ivan is taking me to New

York for the holidays, and we want you to come with us.”

I blink. “To New York?”

He nods, “It’ll be fun. Two whole weeks. Parties. Food. New Year’s Eve in Times Square. Don’t say no.”

“Miles—”

“I am not above kidnapping you. My fiancé knows people who can make it happen. Ivan is insisting that you come with us. He’s going to pay for everything. His way of apologizing for his mistake.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re both so dramatic.”

“You’re my best friend, and I love you. I want to see you smile again. We can go shopping and have cocktails.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Eat our weight in chocolate.”

I can’t help but laugh. I have to admit, the thought of leaving L.A. for a while is more than appealing. “Okay, I’ll come.”

His face lights up. “You will?”

“I’ll have to book the time off work, though.”

“If they don’t agree, quit.”

I shake my head. “I am not quitting my job.”

Miles gives a mock scowl. “Then you better hope they agree. Because one way or another, you’re coming to New York with us.”

CHAPTER 6

ELI

“I’m surprised you’re not going into the city for Christmas.” Roger stamps his feet, knocking off the snow from his boots before stepping inside.

“Are you? *Really?*” I take the box he hands to me and walk into the kitchen.

The older man chuckles. “Maybe not. But it’s not good for you, Eli. Being cooped up here all year round, with barely any human interaction.”

“I like it that way.” I follow him back outside to his 4x4 and take out another three boxes.

“Adaline thought that would be the case, so she prepared enough meals to see you over Christmas and New Year. She’s worried about you starving while we’re away.”

“Are you going to stay with your daughter this year?” I’ve never met Rose, but I’ve heard all about her from the older couple. She escaped to city life as soon as she finished high school, accepting a scholarship at UCLA. She flies her parents out to stay with her twice a year. I’m pretty sure if she could convince them, she’d move them closer, but I don’t think Roger enjoys city life all that much.

“For Christmas and New Year. We’ll be back home during the second week of January sometime. But Addie has cooked

up a storm and made you enough food to see you through to the end of January ... just in case.”

“Thank her for me.”

He snorts. “You’ve thanked us enough. Those solar panels you had installed have been a godsend.”

“I’m sure there’s more I could do.”

“It’s not necessary, Eli.” He drops the final box of food onto the kitchen table and pats my shoulder. “You’re a good boy. I wish you’d go home to your family for Christmas instead of staying out here. Reports say there are blizzards moving in.”

“It’s December. It wouldn’t be Christmas without a blizzard to snow us in.” I shrug. “I like it.”

“Of course, you do.” His voice is dry.

“When are you leaving?” I open the door to my walk-in freezer and start opening boxes and taking out the Tupperware tubs to stack inside.

“Four days’ time.”

“Is there any work you need doing on your place while you’re gone?”

“No. Ever since you repaired the roof for me, we’ve had no problems. If you could stop by and check everything is still locked up while we’re away, I’d appreciate that, but don’t be battling through the snow to do it.”

I smile but don’t say anything. We both know I’ll do it, no

matter the weather.

Once everything is packed away in my freezer, Roger takes his leave. I stand by the door and watch him drive away before pulling on a thick jacket and heading out around the back of the cabin. The temperature has dropped again, so I want to do an area check and make sure everything is protected. I spent a lot of money bringing the cabin up to year-round living standards and have top of the range solar panels, and backup generators installed that give accessibility to electricity, power showers, and more. The nearby lake supplies my water through an underground pump, which goes into a tank where the water is filtered and purified before feeding into my home. I also have underfloor heating throughout, but I rarely use it, preferring the natural log fire in the main room. Since there's only me, I don't feel the need to heat up all the rooms I never use.

When I reach the furthest point of my property, I spot one of the boundary fences has broken. During my first year living out here alone, I decided to build a perimeter fence after bears tried breaking into my storage sheds. Over the years, I've modified and changed how I store food, art supplies and more, but I still keep the fence up just to give me that small barrier against the wildlife living in the forest around me. They can *still* get in, they just need to either climb the fence, break through it or keep following it around until they reach the front of the cabin where there's a gap in the barrier to allow for the narrow road leading out into the forest.

It takes me a while to repair it. It's snowing, not heavily, but enough to leave a thin layer of white on my clothes, and I'm shivering and sneezing by the time I'm done.

Once I'm done, I step back to assess the job. Good enough. Returning my tools to the shed, I lock up and head indoors. My cell bursts into life just as I walk inside.

"Ellie." I break off to cough and clear my throat.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. Just wet. I was—doesn't matter. What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to check and make sure you haven't changed your mind."

"Still not coming to the Hamptons. I'd rather stay here."

She sighs. "Eli, it's Christmas."

I shrug, even though she can't see me. "I have too much to do."

I peel off my jacket. My shirt beneath is just as wet, so that comes off too.

"I have to go. I need to take a shower and get some dry clothes on. If I don't speak to you before, have a lovely Christmas, Ellie. I'll see you in January." I cut the call before she can say anything more and toss my cell onto the couch.

I'm coughing again when I step under the shower, hard enough to make my ribs ache. I hope I'm not coming down with something. I don't have time to be sick. I have too much

to do.

CHAPTER 7

ARABELLA

There's a chill in the air, and I adjust the woolen scarf around my neck, so it's a little tighter. New York City's streets are decked out in shimmering lights and there are dazzling Christmas displays in the shop windows. It's enough to wake up my holiday spirit. Everywhere looks magical, and for once, I can't stop smiling. I'm glad Miles has talked me into this.

He bumps his shoulder gently against mine. "We should find somewhere for lunch."

"I don't mind where we go," My voice is dreamy as I stare up at the decorations adorning the most beautiful Christmas tree I've ever seen, in the window of the store we're standing in front of.

"I have a reservation already booked at a nice little Italian place," Ivan says. "You need to eat if you are going to shop until you drop."

Miles shakes his head, chuckling. "My fiancé is so efficient. He already has everything planned."

"I know what you're like, *Luchik*."

I turn to Ivan, frowning. "What does that mean? I've heard you call him that before."

Lifting his boyfriend's hand, Ivan plants a kiss on his knuckles. "It's a Russian endearment. It means sunray or

sunbeam.”

The love between them makes me smile, but there’s also a tiny pang of jealousy. “It suits you, Miles.”

My best friend is blushing so hard his ears are red. “Are we eating or not?”

The restaurant Ivan has picked isn’t far from our location, and it amuses me how he’s been herding us in the direction he needed while we shopped, without us being aware of it. He’s good for Miles. After a string of relationships that haven’t worked out, I’m happy he’s finally found someone who adores him.

When we reach the restaurant, the hostess ushers us to a table. It’s crowded with chatting tourists and Christmas shoppers. Ivan excuses himself to go to the restroom, while we place all our shopping bags on the floor.

I grin at Miles.

He shrugs out of his coat and hangs it on the back of his chair. “What?”

I laugh while I do the same. “Nothing.”

“Come on. Tell me.”

I drop down into my chair. “I like seeing you and Ivan together.”

He takes the seat beside me. “He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. If I hadn’t wandered into his gallery two years ago, we would never have met.”

“It’s nice to see you happy.”

“I wish you could have what I have with Ivan.”

“Maybe I will ... one day.”

“*When?* Between all your self-defense classes, your firearms training, and your job *when* do you have time to date? I swear I almost passed out when you told me you can carry a licensed handgun now.”

My gaze roams over the faces of the other diners. “A woman can never be too careful.”

“There’s still such a thing as overkill.”

“I like being prepared for anything.”

I watch Ivan weaving his way back to the table. He gives me a thoughtful look, before pulling out a seat and joining us. “What are you two talking about that has Arabella looking so sad?”

Miles flips open the menu in front of him and studies the selection of food on offer. “I told her she needs someone to love her and care for her, like you do with me.”

Ivan chuckles. “Bella is an independent woman. She doesn’t need to be taken care of, she just needs to be valued and loved.”

Miles frowns at the older man. “Are you saying I’m high maintenance?”

“Are you going to deny it, *Luchik?*” The Russian’s attention

returns to me. “I have a cousin, Yuri. He has his own chauffeuring business back in L.A. Very successful. I can set you up with him. He’s a gentleman and knows how to treat a woman.”

I shift uncomfortably on my chair. “That’s kind of you, but I’m not interested in dating right now.”

Ivan’s dark brown eyes lock with mine. “After Miles explained what happened to you both, I understand why you are so guarded. But you should not let fear become a prison. It will stop you from living.”

The server appears, stopping him from saying anything more. I concentrate on the neatly printed words in front of me, but his comment has left me unsettled.

I’m *not* frightened. I *am* living my life. It might not be full of dates and parties, but I’m still content with what I have ... aren’t I?

Liar. I want so much more.

I ignore the little whisper in my head and order the house risotto and a mineral water.

Once she’s written down our orders, the server vanishes.

Miles’ attention roves over the decorations around the restaurant. “Can you believe it’s only four days until Christmas?”

“This year has gone fast,” I agree.

“Has this trip inspired your creativity?”

“I’ve been sketching a few ideas.”

“Is your boss still being a dick?”

“You’re having trouble at work?” Ivan frowns.

I shrug. “We don’t get along, that’s all.”

Miles’ glance shifts to his partner. “He steals her work.”

“I’m thinking about applying for a job in a fashion house in Milan.”

Shocked eyes land on my face at my announcement. “*Milan, as in Italy?*”

Our server reappears with our drinks, and the conversation pauses while she places them down.

I pour some mineral water into my glass. “It might give me a better opportunity to spread my wings and let me show off my talent.” I pick up the thread of conversation again.

“But that’s in Europe.”

“I think Arabella is aware of that.” Ivan takes a sip of his red wine.

Miles’ expression is troubled. “No, I know. I just mean ... well, it’s so far away.”

“It’s just an option I’m considering,” I say. “I might not even get the job.”

Would Evan’s flowers still find me halfway across the world?

It's been six years since I started receiving them, and there's never been a card attached, but I know they're from Evan.

Would moving away stop him? Or will he send them until one of us dies?

Does he still think I'm Zoey?

The last thought sends an icy uneasiness, that has nothing to do with the winter weather outside, lacing its way through my veins.

At the trial, he'd stared at me and Eli the entire time. It got so bad that I ended up staying at home. When Evan was sentenced, Eli called me to tell me.

All those months of waiting for him to be convicted had been threaded with the fear that he might just be set free. I'd never felt such relief as I did that day.

The server returns, carrying a tray with our food. She places our plates in front of us.

I breathe in the fragrant aroma. When I take a bite of the creamy rice, I hum in pleasure. The two men fall silent, and we focus on our food. I'm halfway through my meal when my phone bursts into life.

Wiping my mouth with my napkin, I take my cell out of my coat pocket and answer it. "Hi, Mom, how's the Hamptons? And no, I'm still not coming."

"Bella, I'm worried about Eli." Her voice is filled with concern.

“Why?”

“He isn’t answering his phone.”

“I’m sure he’ll call you back when he can.” I scoop up some risotto.

“You don’t understand. He’s sick.”

Eli is ill? Unwilling concern floods through me. Eli *never* gets sick.

My attention flicks to Miles and Ivan, who are both watching me with undisguised interest. “I hope it’s nothing serious.”

“He sounded bad when I spoke to him two days ago. I don’t like him out there all alone.”

I frown. “Out where?”

“The cabin.”

Her words catch me off guard. “Eli is at the cabin?”

“He lives there. Has for the past five years.”

“I thought he lived at the house in the Hamptons.”

“No, he closed it up after Elliot passed away. If you two still talked, you’d know that.”

“So, you’re telling me that he’s sick and alone in the middle of a forest?” I try to ignore the concern worming its way through me. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Sweetheart, men only *think* they can fend for themselves.

Could you go and check on him? I know you're with your friends in New York, and I'm sorry to ruin your plans like this."

"Mom—"

"*Please*, Arabella. I promised Elliot I'd look after him. If something happened to him, I would never be able to forgive myself ... I'd go myself but you know I'm useless in those kinds of situations."

I close my eyes, guilt eating at me. "Okay."

"Once you get to the airport, you can call an Uber to take you to a town called Hillfar. I'll ask Roger to pick you up from there."

My appetite gone; I leave my fork beside my plate. "Roger?"

"He works for Eli."

"Why can't *he* check on him?"

My mother sighs. "Roger and his wife are flying out to stay with their daughter for the holidays. They can't stay to look after Eli."

A heavy weight settles in my chest. "Oh."

"I know you and Eli don't get along, Arabella, but we're still family. I'm sure he'd do the same for you."

Eli would rather have a hole in his head than help me.

My lips twist. "It's fine. I'll go and make sure he's not dead."

I'll call you when I know something.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

I end the call, and drop my cell onto the table, trying to figure out the things I need to do. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to cut short my stay with you.”

Miles frowns. “Eli is sick, and Elena wants you to play nurse? Are you sure going to see him is wise?”

“We moved on a long time ago.” I smile. “But he’s still family, and it’s the right thing to do.”

CHAPTER 8

ELI

It takes me a little while to realize that the banging I can hear is *not* inside my head. I lay there for a moment longer, weighing the pros and cons of moving.

I've barely slept for two days. I feel like shit. My head is thick, throbbing. The slightest hint of light sends pain like white hot pokers through my eyes. My ribs ache from coughing so much, and I don't think I've ever sneezed this much in my entire fucking life.

The banging on the door starts up again.

Maybe it's a bear looking for food.

Fuck it. It can eat me.

I heave myself up from the couch, where I've been sprawled since forcing myself out of bed, and stagger across to the door.

If there *is* a fucking bear behind the noise, I've made my peace and will welcome death. It can't feel worse than whatever has me in its grip right now. I drag my fingers through my hair before wrapping my hand around the doorknob. Twisting it, I throw open the door.

The form in front of me is *not* a bear.

I frown, my gaze tracking over the tendrils of blonde hair escaping the wooly hat. Blue eyes blink at me.

“Eli?”

My brain moves at a sluggish pace, taking its time to connect the voice to the bundled-up blonde standing on my deck. When it finally puts the two together, I take the only reasonable course of action.

“Fuck off.” I slam the door shut.

What the actual fuck is she doing here?

The moment the question forms, so does the answer.

Elena.

I spin and yank open the door, and catch her with her hand raised, ready to knock again.

“Whatever Elena said, she’s wrong. I don’t know how you got here, but you can turn around and fuck off back to whatever pretty little life you’ve got going on. You’re not welcome.”

“Mom said you’re sick.”

“As you can see, I’m not dead yet. I’m more than capable of looking after myself.”

“You shouldn’t be out here alone, if you’re unwell.”

I snort. “Give me a break. Like you give a fuck. Call back your Uber or Lyft or whatever the fuck you used and *go home.*” I slam the door again and retreat to the couch.

Why the fuck has Elena sent her here?

I sink onto the cushions and close my eyes. The throbbing is

getting worse. I don't need this right now. I don't want someone witnessing my weakness. The *last* thing I want is for that someone to be *her*.

CHAPTER 9

ARABELLA

I stare at the closed door. For a second, I'd thought Roger had dropped me at the wrong cabin when a burly mountain man answered my knocking ... but then he opened his mouth.

This is *not* the Eli I remember. He's broader and rugged, the t-shirt I'd glimpsed hugging the muscles of his biceps and chest. I'd barely recognized him with his beard. But the stormy green eyes that peered at me through the long messy strands of hair are the same ones that haunt my dreams.

What happened to the boy I used to know?

The man who's taken his place is big and scary looking ... *scarier* looking, I amend.

A white cloud appears in front of my face, with my exhaled breath. Roger is long gone. He dropped me off, dumped my bags on the porch, and warned me not to expect a friendly welcome.

But I'm not about to stand outside the cabin and freeze just because Eli Travers is being prickly. I'm not the scared little eighteen-year-old he could bully, or the one who looked at him with utter adoration. Now, I'm a woman who isn't inclined to take his shit.

Walk in and take charge. Don't stop to think. Keep busy.

When I try the doorknob, it opens easily, and I step inside.

The warmth from the fire in the hearth washes over me, chasing away a little of the chill in my bones. Eli is sprawled on the couch with an arm thrown over his eyes. If he's heard me enter, he gives no sign of it.

I press my lips together, grab my bags from outside, wheel in my suitcase, and close the door.

Tugging off my hat, I drop it on the nearest chair. My scarf, gloves, and coat join it. "Have you eaten?"

He lowers his arm and pins me with a glare.

"The fuck?" he growls. "I told you to go home."

"I'm not going anywhere," My voice is prim.

"Get the fuck out."

I eye him across the room. "Even from here, I can see you're in no fit state to be left alone. Your skin is flushed and —"

Eli coughs thick and fast, his body contorting with the force of each one.

"That doesn't sound good." I finish, arching an eyebrow.

Still coughing, he flips me his middle finger.

"Don't be childish." I cross over to him, snatch up the blanket heaped at the end of the couch, and drape it over him.

Eli bares his teeth, snapping them together at me. "Did you run out of charity cases back home?"

"Don't be dramatic." I roll my eyes.

“*I’m* being dramatic? You’re the one on my fucking doorstep just because I’ve got a cold.”

“From the way you’re coughing, it sounds like it’s more than a cold.”

“Then fuck off and just let me die in peace. I’ll see you at my funeral.”

“Stop acting like a baby. I *do* care about you, Eli. Just because we aren’t together, doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

A nerve jerks in his jaw. “Bullshit.” He winces and closes his eyes.

“Are you in pain?”

“No.”

I sigh. “Eli.”

He’s silent for a second, then he scowls. “My head hurts, okay?”

“Where do you keep your painkillers?”

“Bathroom cabinet.”

I turn to walk along the hallway, in search of the bathroom. There are doors I don’t remember, and the hallway splits off at the end. On the drive up, I’d seen buildings around the cabin that I don’t recall being there the last time I was here. But it’s been ten years, and I guess more has changed than just how the boy I’d loved looks now.

I still can’t believe he’s living out here like some kind of a

hermit.

Memories of the week we'd spent here for spring break spill into my thoughts—Eli's hands and mouth on my body, and the way he'd made me scream with pleasure. I shut them down, and concentrate on what I need to do, instead of the echo of desire heating my body.

I find the bottle of painkillers in the medicine cabinet above the sink, and tip two out. In the kitchen, I take down a glass, fill it with water and bring it back to my patient.

“Here.” I hold out the pills.

He sits up, takes them from me, accepts the glass of water and swallows them down, then hands it back to me.

“Now get the fuck out.”

“Not happening.” I leave the glass on the table and collect the bags I've left by the door. “Roger said you had frozen food, but I bought some things while waiting for him to pick me up.”

“What part of fuck off aren't you getting? I don't want anything from you. He can take you back to wherever you've sprung up from.”

“Too late. He's gone.”

“Fuck's sake. Then I'll drive you to town.” He tries to rise, only to fall back onto the couch with another coughing fit.

“When you're strong enough to kick me out, I'll go.”

He glowers at me. “There’s nothing fucking wrong with me.”

I ignore him and carry the bags through to the kitchen. I spread out all the ingredients for chicken soup over the counter, and put away the meat, vegetables, Christmas cake, and the rest of the shopping.

All is quiet in the main room, and when I walk back in, I discover Eli has passed out on the couch. I’d been ready for his anger and his hate. It’s something I’ve experienced before, but I’m not the naïve eighteen-year-old girl I’d once been. I have armor against the world now.

I’m still unable to resist reaching out to brush a loose strand of hair off his face, though. Even asleep, he looks fierce. I search his features for the boy I loved. There are hints of him beneath the beard.

My Nasty Little Monster is still there. He’s just become bigger and older and angrier. I’m sure that he hates me now, just as hard as he had before he loved me.

Seeing him again is painful. Confronted by his face and his voice, I’m rocked by the admission that I’ve never been able to get over him. Being with him had been the sweetest of agony. An addiction that left me hollow when I chose to walk away.

CHAPTER 10

ELI

The tantalizing aroma of chicken soup wakes me moments before a hand touches my arm.

“Eli?” Her voice is low, barely more than a whisper.

I contemplate ignoring her. Maybe she’s a hallucination. Maybe she’s really a bear and I’m imagining that it looks like Arabella. The image of a bear superimposes that of how I remember her looking when I opened the door, and I chuckle at the visual of it wearing the wooly hat, thick coat, and gloves.

“What’s funny?” A cool hand touches my forehead. “You’re burning up. Eat this and then let’s get you to bed.”

I snort. “First time you’ve ...” I stop to cough ... “...been eager to get me into bed ...” More coughing. “... in a long time.” The dig doesn’t have quite the same impact broken up by all the coughing.

She ignores me. “Can you sit up?”

I force myself to open my eyes just so I can glare at her. “Just fuck off out of here.”

Instead of doing as I demand, she slides a hand beneath my shoulders and hauls me upright. The change in position sends me into yet another coughing fit. When I finally catch my breath, she hands me a glass of water. I don’t take it.

“What have you put in it?”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“At least tell me it’ll give me a quick death.”

Her eyeroll is exaggerated and combined with a headshake. “I can’t believe how dramatic you’re being. Drink the water, then eat the soup.” She picks up a bowl from the coffee table.

“What’s that?”

“Chicken soup.”

“I’m vegetarian.” My voice is flat.

“What? Since when?”

I fall heavily back against the couch, and let my eyes close, without answering her. The silence following my statement is deafening. I sing the lyrics to ‘Ghost’ by Badflower in my head. I finish the first verse and then something hits me in the stomach.

“You’re such a fucking asshole. I should have known you’d be worse if you were sick. I *should* leave and just let you rot!”

I wave a hand toward the door. “You know where the exit is.”

“Fuck you, Eli. Eat the fucking soup.”

I ignore her, and after a while I hear her moving around. I wait for the front door to open, but it doesn’t. Instead, there’s the sounds of glasses clinking or maybe silverware hitting china.

I open my eyes. The living room is empty. A couch cushion is on my lap—probably what she threw at me when she saw all the meat-based meals in the freezer. The bowl of soup is on the coffee table, with a glass of water beside it. My stomach rumbles, reminding me it’s been a while since I last ate.

With careful movements, I ease back upright and turn so my feet are on the floor. Reaching for the bowl, I settle it on my lap and lift the spoon to my mouth. One mouthful turns into two, and before I know it, I’ve emptied the bowl and drained the water.

I push to my feet so I can take the empty bowl and glass into the kitchen. She’s sitting at the breakfast bar with a cup of tea and flicking through a magazine. Her eyes lift to find mine as I move past her to the sink. Rinsing the bowl, I pull open the dishwasher and place it inside, then straighten and face her.

“Get your coat on. I’ll take you back to town.”

Her spine stiffens. “I’m not leaving. One bowl of soup doesn’t magically make you better.”

“I don’t fucking want you here.”

One slim shoulder lifts in a shrug, and she returns her attention to the magazine. “Noted.” But she doesn’t move from where she’s sitting.

“For fuck’s sake.” I drag a hand through my hair and spin away. *Big mistake.* The room spins and then the floor comes up to meet my face.

I weave in and out of consciousness. Part of me is aware of time passing, but mostly there are just moments, snatches of time, where my eyes open to stare briefly at the ceiling and then close again.

I rise out of the darkness when something touches my lips—water, I think. My tongue snakes out to lick away the droplets, but I don't open my eyes. I'm not sure I can. They feel glued shut. Fingers stroke over my face, my jaw, and soft words are murmured close to my ear, but I can't understand them. They're nonsense words, the tone meant purely to soothe. I find myself turning into the caress, searching out the warmth of the touch, only for it to retreat away.

My body can't make its mind up. One minute it's cold, the next I'm overheating. I pull off my t-shirt and throw it across the room, only to find my teeth chattering seconds later and I need to drag the sheets up to my chin ... and then kick them off because the cotton feels like razor blades against my skin.

I can't get comfortable, can't settle down. Maybe I should take a shower and see if that helps?

Dragging myself off the mattress, I cross the room and pull open the door. The bathroom is the next room along and I bounce off the wall twice before I reach it. As I reach for the door handle, a soft gasp sounds from behind me.

“Eli! Why are you naked?”

CHAPTER 11

ARABELLA

Eli is standing naked in the hallway, his skin slick with sweat as he shivers. I should look away, but I can't. My gaze greedily roams over every inch of his sculpted frame and the new tattoos that hadn't been there when we'd been together. Even with the muscles, he's still lean-hipped. It makes me wonder if he's still running. My cardio is on a machine in the gym nowadays. I miss shoving on a pair of sneakers and hitting the sidewalk in the mornings before breakfast.

I need to stick to my plan to feign indifference. Pretend I'm impervious to his insults and frostiness. Act like seeing him naked doesn't have my body reacting, that unwanted arousal isn't thrumming through every cell in my being.

"Eli?" I touch his shoulder. The heat radiating off him is scorching.

He mumbles something unintelligible, turns toward me, and stumbles into my arms. I catch him, groaning, as his weight sags into me.

"Ari." His hand lifts and cups my left breast through my sweater and squeezes it in his palm.

I pull it away. "Eli, stop."

His free hand cradles my jaw, and his lips capture mine. It's a hard press of his mouth. His tongue darts out, but I break the

contact before he can deepen the kiss.

“Hot,” he mutters. His gaze is unfocused, pupils dilated as they dart around.

I guide him toward the bedroom. “Come on, let’s get you back to bed.”

He runs his hand down my side to my ass to grip it tightly. “You going to fuck me, Hellcat? I want to touch you.”

“You’re sick.” I remind him, shuffling him around to face the door.

He leans into me and starts swaying back and forth. “Dance, then.”

“No, we’re not dancing.”

He frowns and licks his lips. “I don’t want you.”

“I know,” I reply with a sad smile.

“Why are you here?”

“Because someone needs to look after you.”

He snorts. “I don’t need anyone. They only bring pain when they go.”

“Eli—”

“You only wanted Sin.” He shakes his head. “You never gave a shit about me. All you wanted was your lover in the dark.”

“You *are* Sin, remember? How many times did you remind

me of that?”

“Not enough for it to matter.”

It takes a while to get him across the room and back down onto the mattress. The sheet is twisted to one side, and his clothes are discarded on the floor. He groans,

I stare down at him, worry gnawing at me. “I’ll be back. Stay right there.”

I go into the kitchen and fill a bowl with cold water, then take a clean hand towel from the bathroom. Returning to the bedroom, I sit beside him on the bed and sponge his face and chest, in an attempt to bring his temperature down. He moves toward the coolness every time I stroke it over his skin.

“It’s going to be okay,” I whisper to him. “I’m not going to leave you. I promise.”

“But you did.” His eyes slid closed. “You left me a long time ago.”

He’s delirious, and even though part of me knows he’s saying whatever comes into his head, I can’t stop myself from answering. “You didn’t give me any choice.”

“There’s always a choice, Ari.”

“That’s not true.”

“Why?”

“You know why.” I run the damp cloth over his forehead, pushing the hair plastered to it aside.

“I thought you loved me.” His voice is low and tortured, ripping at my insides. “But you didn’t. Only Kellan saw me for who I was.” He rears up. “Kellan? Where’s Kellan?”

My heart twists with pain as he calls for his dead best friend, and thrashes from side to side.

“I’ve got to find him.”

His swinging arm narrowly misses my face. “You need to rest.” I push him back down to the bed.

“The chapel. He’s in the chapel. I have to go and get him. Before Evan ... *No*, I can’t be late ...”

I’m not going to fucking survive this. I’ve relived this in my nightmares, and I’m not ready to go through it again with a delusional Eli.

“Kellan is right here with Miles,” I lie, hoping it will calm him.

He pushes up again and tries to climb off the bed. “I need to wash my hands. They’re stained. I can’t get rid of the blood. So much blood.”

Climbing on top of him, I straddle his hips, and push him back down. “Kellan is safe. He’s safe.”

“Why can’t I find him?”

“He’s right here with us, and he wants you to get better.” I frame his face with my hands, and whisper to him over and over, while I stroke his cheeks, damp hair, shoulders, and chest. “I’ve got you... please stop. Please, Eli.”

His expression contorts with pain. “Kellan!”

He fights against me, but he’s too weak.

“Let me die.” His hand lifts and tangles with the padlock hanging around my neck. “Then I can be with Kellan, and my parents. There’s nothing for me here. Just let me die.”

I fight to stop from crying at his anguished plea and untangle his fingers from the chain. I remove it and slip it into my pocket. I don’t want him to rip it off or accidentally strangle me with it. After wearing it for so many years it feels strange not to feel its familiar weight.

He slowly quiets under my caresses and reassuring words, and eventually I can crawl off him and return to sponging him with the cloth. When the water loses its coolness, I go to the bathroom, tip it out, and refill the bowl from the cold tap.

Eli rambles continuously. He was never a big talker when we were together, that was Kellan, and the sound of his voice shreds my emotions. Sometimes he talks about his dad, others about me, but mostly about Kellan and Zoey. It’s not all reliving the horrors he’s been through. Some of it is of the time they spent together. Happy moments he’s remembering in his fevered mind.

I listen in silence, my heart breaking for him all over again, only speaking when his agitation returns, and it feels like hours before he finally slips into a fretful sleep.

Back aching, I carry the bowl and cloth into the kitchen and leave them by the sink. My eyes are heavy, and I rub them to

dispel the tiredness. I don't want to risk using one of the other bedrooms to take a nap. I need to keep an eye on him. If his fever gets worse, I have to be ready to call someone for help.

My steps are tired as I move to the window, and peer out into the darkness. Tiny white snowflakes are drifting down in front of the glass. With a sigh, I gather up my bag and dig out my cell to call my mom. Her number goes straight to voicemail. Not surprising as it's so late.

I wait for the beep.

“Hi, Mom. Just letting you know that I'm with Eli. I think he has the flu. I'm staying with him until he's over the worst of it—no need to call back. I'll talk to you soon. Bye.”

Glancing toward the refrigerator, I toy with the idea of making something to eat but push it aside and go back into the main room. I use the iron poker beside the hearth to poke the logs and keep the fire burning. It's warm enough that we won't freeze, but I'll need to get more logs from somewhere in the morning. Eli must have a store in one of the buildings outside.

A gleam of color reflected in the firelight catches my eye, and my attention rises to the crystal raven sitting on the mantelpiece, its wings outstretched, ready to fly. I run my finger over one of the wings, brushing my fingertips over it gently.

Kellan's ashes are inside. I still remember the day Eli received them. He'd broken down in my arms that night, and witnessing his devastation had been almost as bad as the day

we'd found Kellan dead.

CHAPTER 12

ELI

“I always wondered what the inside of your head looked like. Should have guessed it’d be an art studio.” Kellan flashes me a grin as he flicks a finger against an easel holding a partly finished painting.

“You’re dead. This isn’t real.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m aware of that, thank you very much. Do you think Miles ever thinks about me?” He flops down onto the large beanbag in one corner.

I frown at it. I’m sure it wasn’t there a moment ago.

“I was sure he’d pine after me for a while.”

“It’s been ten years.”

“Huh. Doesn’t feel that long.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I agree quietly.

“So what are you doing?”

I pick up a paintbrush and swirl it in green paint. “What do you mean?”

“I’m the one who died, not you.”

“I know that.”

“So why are you behaving as though *you’re* the one who’s dead?” He stretches his legs out in front of him and smirks at

me.

“I’m not.”

He snorts. “Sure. You’re out here in the middle of nowhere, looking like a fucking yeti, and pushing away all the people who care about you.”

“*All* the people? Because there are so many, right?”

“More than you think.” Another voice—this one comes from behind me.

I turn. My dad is standing in the doorway. “Kellan’s right. What are you doing, son?”

Dropping the paintbrush, I rake a hand through my hair. “What is this? I can’t even have people see my side of things inside my own head?”

“We see your side; we just don’t think it’s right. And, as you rightly pointed out, this is all in your head, so *you* feel the same way.”

“Bullshit.”

“Seriously?” Kellan stands. “You’re arguing with your own subconscious now?”

“Shhh, you need to rest.” I twist around, looking for the source of the voice, but Arabella isn’t there.

“I need everyone to just leave me the fuck alone.”

“She’s not going to do that, Eli.”

I nail Kellan with a glare. “Of course, she will. She was

good at leaving me alone.”

“That’s not fair, Eli.” Ari’s voice is soft, but I *still* can’t see her.

“Isn’t it? You left me alone all the fucking time, always running off to spend the day with Garrett or Miles. You were only fucking happy when you were with them.”

“That’s not true. I was happy with you.”

I laugh, the sound rusty and rough. “Do you hear that?” I look at Kellan. “She was so happy with me that she never fucking smiled unless she was leaving the house to spend time with someone else.”

“I smiled at you.”

“*When?* When did you smile at me? You’d smile when you told me you were going to see Miles, you’d laugh when you saw Garrett. But you never smiled at *me*.”

“Because you were smothering me. Demanding to be with me every second of the day. I felt closed in, trapped.”

I shake my head. “See. This is why I stay out here away from people, Kell. *She* felt trapped. She has no fucking idea how I felt. Never asked how I was dealing with everything. Had no idea how I couldn’t breathe the entire time she was out of the house. How I waited for that call to say Evan had escaped and taken her again. None of that mattered because *she* felt trapped. It didn’t fucking occur to her that the only time I got to see her fucking smile was if she was with Garrett

and Miles ... so why the fuck *wouldn't* I want to be there? I just wanted to see her happy.”

“Eli.” The three voices of her, Kellan and my dad mix together, becoming one, and solidify into Ari’s alone. “Please wake up.”

But I don’t want to wake up. Waking will bring pain. Here I can control what is happening. It’s safe here inside my head.

Anyway, Kellan is here. And I miss him. So fucking much.

My eyes snap open. Something woke me. A sound? Frowning, I struggle to focus on my surroundings until the ceiling above my bed comes into focus.

That’s right. I’m in the cabin, not the Hamptons.

So, what was the noise I heard?

I twist and place my feet on the floor, then scowl down at my legs.

Why the fuck am I naked?

When I stand, I stumble slightly. I feel weak, like I haven’t eaten in days. My entire body aches.

Did I get drunk last night?

Rubbing a hand down my face, I cross to the dresser and pull out a pair of sweatpants. The floor beneath my feet is cold and I can see my breath every time I breathe out. The fire in the main room must have gone out. It’s probably time for me

to use the internal heating instead, especially if the storm Roger predicted hits. I drag on a t-shirt and a fleece jacket over the top, then dig through a drawer for a pair of socks. Too cold to go barefoot, at least until the underfloor heating has done its job, anyway.

Once I'm dressed, I step out into the hallway. Heating, then coffee, breakfast, and a shower. I don't have any other plans for the day.

A clang sounds and I stop.

What the fuck was that?

I creep down the hallway and into the living room. There's someone in my kitchen. I can see their shadow as they move across the room. Wrapping one hand around the poker beside the fireplace, I train my gaze on the kitchen door and move forward.

Has a bear managed to get in?

It's not outside the realms of possibility that one has woken from hibernation and broken into the cabin in search of food.

A quick glance toward the door tells me that's not possible. A bear wouldn't have closed and locked the door behind it. Reaching the doorway, I raise the poker.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

There's a small scream, and then my gaze is filled with wide blue eyes and blonde hair.

The poker clatters to the floor.

“Arabella?”

CHAPTER 13

ARABELLA

Heart in my mouth, I scream, and spin around. Eli is in the doorway, wielding a poker. The look of shock on his face is almost comical as he drops his weapon onto the floor.

“*Arabella?*”

“What the fuck, Eli?” I snap, my voice shrill.

“I thought you were a fucking bear!”

“Really? *Really?*” I glare at him and shove him back through the door. He moves back a step, and I tell myself I don’t notice how solid his chest is. “Well, Merry fucking Christmas to you too!”

“Christmas?” he repeats.

I nod. “You’ve been out of it for three days. It’s Christmas Day, or what’s left of it, at least.”

He eyes me, rubbing a hand across his bearded jaw. “Why are you sneaking around my kitchen?”

“I was trying to find the keys to the woodshed. The fire went out last night, and I’ve been tearing the place apart trying to find them.” I nail him with a glare, while trying to stop my teeth from chattering. “I’m also trying to cook dinner, and make sure *you* don’t starve to death.”

He rolls his eyes. “You could have just turned the heat on.”

“*What* heat system?” My voice is flat.

“The one I had installed.” He folds his arms, and tilts his head, and the move is so much the Eli I knew all those years ago, that my mouth dries up.

I scowl. “Well, *that* would have been useful to know when I first turned up.”

“I wasn’t expecting visitors. Sorry I didn’t put a fucking welcome sign up detailing all the available luxuries. I thought you fucked off the same day you arrived.”

“Of course, you did.” I stoop and pick the poker up from the floor. “Because I’m an evil heartless bitch who wants to see you suffer.”

His footsteps follow behind me. “You said it, not me.”

I place the poker back beside the hearth, and then spin to face him. “Could you just get some heat in here, please, before I become an ice cube?”

His chest moves with an irritable huff. “Fine.”

I go back into the kitchen to check on the boiling vegetables and small turkey I have cooking then lean against the counter and close my eyes.

I’m so tired. I’ve been living on no more than snatches of sleep for the last few days, while I focused on nursing Eli back to health.

“It’s on.” His tone is clipped.

I keep my eyes closed, wrapping my arms around myself as another bout of shivering hits me. “Hallefuckinglylah.”

“I’m going to go take a shower.”

“Good. You stink.” He doesn’t.

I count to ten before I open my eyes, and stare at the falling snow beyond the kitchen window. There’s a dull throbbing in my temple, and my body aches. This is not how I’d envisioned spending Christmas. But at least he’s awake.

I’ve spent days living on coffee, anxiously waiting for his fever to break, terrified of what would happen if he got worse.

Another shiver wracks me. I hope the heating kicks in quickly. To keep warm, I set the table with plates, and silverware. Glasses come next, and I waver over whether to open a bottle of wine, then decide against it. He’s been sick. The last thing he needs is alcohol. I consider the contents of the refrigerator and settle on two bottles of water.

Paper napkins and the centerpiece I made add the final touch to the table. It’s nothing special, just a glass jar with a few cranberries and sprigs of a fir tree from outside when I’d gone to check the woodshed, but it gives a little festive cheer.

I drain the vegetables and take the turkey out of the oven. Eli comes stalking into the kitchen, just as I finish plating everything up.

I gesture at his seat. “Hungry?”

He pokes at my centerpiece with his finger. “What the fuck

is that?”

“I thought it would brighten the place up a little.” I join him at the table. “I looked for Christmas decorations, but I couldn’t find a box anywhere.”

“I don’t have any.”

“You don’t put up decorations?”

He shrugs. “Why would I? It’s not like Santa’s coming with gifts for me, is it?”

I frown at him. “You could have a tree, at least.”

“Who for? The unwanted guest I wasn’t expecting?” His eyes are like chips of cold hard jade. “You don’t have the right to come here and tell me what I should or shouldn’t be doing.”

“I’m not—”

“Sure, you’re not.”

The pain in my temple throbs, and as much as I want to argue with him, I’m too exhausted to waste my energy.

“It’s Christmas. Let’s not fight. I bought hot chocolate and marshmallows for later.”

“I don’t eat fucking chocolate.” Stabbing his fork into a carrot, he pops it into his mouth.

He’s back to being the unbearable beast who slammed the door in my face when I first arrived. The vulnerable, helpless Eli I’ve been tending to is gone.

We eat in silence, the mood between us strained and

uncomfortable.

I'd hoped things would be easier once he felt better. Maybe I expected a little gratitude for looking after him. Guess I was wrong.

I eat half of my meal and push my plate away. While Eli carries on eating, I busy myself with putting the leftovers away and carving up the rest of the turkey. We have enough to last us a few days. Once everything is done, I wash and dry my hands.

"I'm going into the other room." I don't even bother to look at him.

In the bathroom, I swallow down a painkiller before retracing my steps. I switch on the radio I found in a kitchen cabinet and tune it to the station playing Christmas music. Keeping the music low, I set it on the coffee table and curl up on the comfortable couch.

"Thank you for watching over me, Arabella. Thank you for cooking for me. Thank you for sitting and watching me breathe every waking second while I've been sick." I mutter under my breath. "Thank you for caring."

I grab the blanket I've been using to keep warm since the fire went out and wrap it around myself. If Eli wants to play Scrooge, that's fine, he can stay with the ghosts of the past. I'm going to at least try and squeeze some enjoyment out of the day. Lying down, I tuck my hand under my cheek and listen to the music.

CHAPTER 14

ELI

I finish the meal slowly. If she's right and it's Christmas Day, then somehow, I've lost three days. My gaze shifts to the doorway. Which means she's been here the entire time. Was that why I could hear her voice but not see her? Did she hear anything I said?

Fuck. I hope not.

I scrub a hand down my face, push the plate away and stand. There's a small bed and breakfast in town. I'll drive her there. She won't be able to get a flight out until tomorrow, but one night won't hurt her. It's better for us both if she's not here.

I take some time to clear the plates and stack the dishwasher then walk back into the living room. The chill has gone from the air and the floor under my feet is warm. Low music is playing, and it takes me a second or two to realize it's coming from the small radio on the coffee table.

A stab of pain goes through me. Where did she find it? I'm surprised it still works. The last time I'd seen that radio was back when my mom was alive.

My gaze moves from the radio to Arabella. She's stretched out on the couch, her eyes closed, and she's burrowed under a blanket. It's from one of the guest rooms. I look away from her to the kitchen and back again, then sigh.

This is such a fucking mistake.

Kellan's laughter echoes through my head.

"Arabella?" She doesn't stir. I crouch so I'm at eye level with her. "*Arabella?*" Still nothing. My jaw clenches.

Kellan's laughter grows louder.

"Shut the fuck up," I mutter, and crouch to scoop her up, and stride down the hallway to the guest bedroom. Nudging the door open, I deposit her gently onto the bed, draw the blankets up around her, and creep back out.

I don't question too closely why I dig out my snow boots, wrap myself up in another jacket and pull on gloves. Nor do I think too hard about the fact I spend the next hour chopping down a small tree that will pass for a Christmas tree.

I have it indoors, in a small pot, and decorated with my mom's old decorations, which I'd stored in one of the sheds, and covered in lights before the sun sets. Once that's done, I relight the fire and then make the coffee I promised myself hours ago.

Just that small amount of physical work has drained me, and I'm sprawled out on the couch, doodling in a sketchbook, when Arabella finally emerges from the bedroom.

The room is lit only by the fire and lights from the tree, and she stops in the doorway, eyes wide as they dart from the tree to the fire then to me and back to the tree.

"There's coffee in the pot." Her eyes jerk back to me when I

speak. I shift my attention back to the sketchbook on my lap.

“Eli—”

I don’t look up. “Thank you for watching over me, Arabella. Thank you for cooking for me. Thank you for sitting and watching me breathe every waking second while I’ve been sick.” My voice is dry.

“Oh ... you heard that.” She sounds sheepish.

“Hard not to.” I put the sketchbook to one side. “For the record, I didn’t ask you to do any of it, but if you need to be acknowledged for your unwanted sacrifice ...” I wave a hand toward the tree. “There’s your thanks.”

And just like that the glow of pleasure leaves her eyes. She spins away. “You’re still a fucking asshole.”

“Did you expect me not to be?” I stand. “Maybe I’m supposed to be the sad, pathetic hermit living in a cabin in the woods. Did it ever occur to you that I *chose* to live here alone? That I *want* to be alone and not surrounded by people who can fuck me over?” I shake my head. “Of course, you fucking didn’t. Why would it? That’s not what the mighty Arabella Gray wants for her life, so why should I want something different.” I stalk past her. “Enjoy your fucking Christmas tree. And get your shit packed. As soon as the sun rises, I’m taking you to the nearest town.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” As soon as I get out of bed and throw

open the curtains, I can see there's no fucking way I'm taking Arabella anywhere.

It's snowing up a fucking storm outside, and while I *could* risk the road and drive into town, there's no way Arabella will agree. *That* means I'm stuck with her until it's safe enough to drive. If I didn't know better, I'd think she fucking planned this.

Throwing on sweats and a t-shirt, I walk out into the hallway and down to the living room. It's empty and dark, which means she's still in bed. I contemplate waking her up but decide against it. This way I can have my morning coffee in peace, and maybe get out to my art studio before she rises. If I can lock myself away, it means I won't need to speak to her until nightfall.

Except when I try to open the front door, it won't move. I tip my head forward to rest against the wood.

"Fuck my life."

We're completely snowed in, and the sheer volume of the white stuff has frozen the front door shut.

"I'm ready." Arabella's voice reaches me.

I bang my head gently against the door. "Well, you might as well go and get *unready*. We're not going anywhere."

"For god's sake, Eli. Make your mind up!"

I spin to face her. "*Me?* I'm not the one who fucking turned up here knowing there was going to be a snowstorm. You

fucking knew there would be no way I can take you back to town.” I narrow my eyes. “What the fuck do you *really* want?”

CHAPTER 15

ARABELLA

His outburst catches me on a raw nerve, and I stiffen. “Now wait a damn minute. I didn’t know there was going to be a storm! Elena said nothing, nor did your friend when he dropped me off.”

Eli’s lips twist. “Of course, they didn’t.”

“You think I’m *lying*?”

“Who in their right fucking mind would come out here without checking the weather report first?”

Hands on my hips, I glare at him. “An idiot who got talked into looking after a sick asshole. I don’t want *anything* from you. Why the hell would I want to be snowed in and stuck here?”

“I never asked for your help.” His voice is flat and emotionless.

“I’m aware. As you keep reminding me over and over—you’d rather talk to the people in your head than the real people who care about you.”

“We both know you don’t—”

I snatch the closest cushion off one of the chairs and hurl it at his head. “If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t be here, you jerk. I swear this place is making you even more crazy than you already were.”

He scowls as the cushion hits its mark and tumbles onto the floor at his feet. “Shut up—”

“Because you’re not a sad and pathetic hermit living in a cabin in the woods, right?” I toss his words back at him. “God knows what the locals think. Crazy Mr. Travers, the artist who looks like some kind of freaking wild-eyed lumberjack who wanders around talking to himself.”

Eli stalks towards me, his expression dark and menacing. “You know *nothing* about me.”

I stand my ground, raising my chin in challenge. “I knew you once.”

He laughs, the bitter sound bouncing off the cabin walls. “A lot has changed in ten fucking years. I’m not the boy you used to know.”

“No, you’re not.” I agree. “You’re an even bigger asshole than before. But I’m not the same either, Eli. I’m not the scared little girl you used to intimidate.”

His gaze rakes over me from head to foot. “No, you look more like the spoiled little princess I imagined you to be now.”

I keep my features impassive, ignoring the nickname I hate. “What if I am?”

“How did that twenty-year plan work out for you, hmmm?”

“Right on track, thank you.”

He tilts his head, studying my face. “So, you have the perfect little life?”

There's no way he knows that I hate my job and boss. I haven't told my mother, and the only people I've confided in are Ivan and Miles.

I smile tightly. "That's right. I do. I have the perfect job, an apartment of my own, a busy social life ... what do you have?" I take a slow look around. "Other than snow and loneliness?"

We glare at each other, neither of us moving or blinking. The tension between us is electric. Eli is looming right in front of me like a disgruntled caveman. Does he seriously believe I made the storm happen? If my mom hadn't sent me to check on him, I wouldn't be here now.

No, he would have been alone and sick in a frozen cabin.

I push the annoying little voice in my head aside.

Eli breaks the silence first. "As soon as the storm clears, you're out of here, *Princess*."

"Fine by me."

"Just because we're sharing the cabin doesn't mean we have to see each other. You can stay in the guestroom."

"Oh no," I shake my head. "I'm not staying in there for god knows how many days this storm could go on for."

His gaze is still locked on my face. "Then I guess you'll just have to stay out of my fucking way."

"You're cooking for yourself?"

“I’ve lived here for five years, Princess. I have plenty of food. Contrary to what you seem to believe, I did survive without your fucking culinary skills.”

“Good, I don’t want to have to see your face while I’m trying to eat.” I walk into the kitchen. “I’m making breakfast. Stay out here or go back to your bedroom.”

A growl follows me, and I bite back a smug grin.

Did he think I was going to scurry back to my room?

We might be stuck together, but I’m not going to let him bully me into doing what he wants.

I’m not a scared little girl anymore, and he’s no longer the Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy.

CHAPTER 16

ELI

She takes her sweet fucking time making whatever it is she's decided to have for breakfast. Jokes on her because I rarely eat breakfast anyway. I spend the time trying to unblock the front door. A pointless task as the snow has built up so much, there's no way it's going to shake loose. If it continues, I might have to climb out of a window, but it's not important right now.

"You can use the kitchen now." Her voice is prim, clipped, and full of annoyance.

I turn to face her and lift an eyebrow. "You understand that this is *my* house, right? You don't get to dictate what I do or when I do it."

She smirks at me. "I could always remove your cute little color codes from the microwave or food containers."

My expression doesn't change, but my tone does. It turns silky. "Do it. See what happens. If you think the punishments I meted out when we were eighteen were hard to stomach, just wait until you see what I'm capable of now."

"I'm not scared of you, Eli."

I let my gaze drift over her. "You used to be. It wouldn't be hard to bring all those feelings back. We're here all alone." I take a step toward her. "There's no one here to stop me."

Her expression turns cold. “Thank you for the reminder of why I walked away from you.” And then she turns and does it again, turning her back on me and walking away with her breakfast, into the guest room.

I don’t try to stop her. My nerves are already raw from having her in my space. The best thing I can do is keep our interactions brief until the storm has passed and I can send her home.

What the fuck was Elena thinking by sending her here?

As soon as the question enters my mind, I search for my cell and call my stepmom’s number, but I get an unavailable tone. Staring down at the screen, I see a no network notice.

“Fucking thing.” I throw it on the couch. “Just fucking great.”

We’re stuck in the middle of a forest, alone, with no way of contacting the outside world. If we both survive the next few days without killing each other, it’ll be a fucking miracle.

You’re such an idiot.

My eyes land on the crystal raven on the mantelpiece. “Get out of my head, Kell.”

I would, except I’m the only person in the cabin who’s talking to you right now.

I shake my head. “Please stop talking.”

Sometimes I wonder if I can really hear him or whether I’m just insane. I don’t *think* I’m crazy, but like Arabella threw out

earlier—I live alone in the woods with the voices in my head. But if I *know* the voices aren't real, surely that means I'm not crazy ... right?

I drop down onto the couch and reach for my sketchbook.

What does it fucking matter, anyway? In a couple of days, she'll be gone and it'll go back to being just me and the voices.

I flip open my sketchbook and pick up one of the many pencils scattered around. An image of Arabella stares up at me. A moment captured in time. She's staring directly at a person out of range of the image, her eyes locked onto whatever they're doing. Her lips are parted, and a hint of her tongue can be seen as it's creeping out to wet her lips.

I laugh quietly. If she ever saw these ... the piles of sketchbooks full of drawings of her, she'd probably accuse me of stalking her. Of being sick and obsessed.

Maybe I am.

Maybe that's why I'm out here, living alone in the woods. To stop me from following her halfway across the country and watching from the outskirts while she lives the life she planned.

Does she have a boyfriend out in the world? Is that why she's so angry about being here?

My head lifts, gaze shifting to the hallway.

Or is she angry because I didn't fall at her feet?

I'm outside her bedroom door before I really consider what I'm doing, with my hand raised and ready to knock.

What the fuck are you doing? Kellan demands from somewhere inside my head.

I ignore him and rap on the door.

"Go away."

I ignore *her* as well and turn the handle. The door swings open, revealing Arabella sitting cross-legged in the center of the bed. She lifts her head and glares at me.

"Last I checked go away wasn't code for come on in."

"Last *I* checked the deed for this house is in my name and not yours. You're an unwanted guest. Why the fuck are you here?"

"Has being out here addled your brains? I *told* you. Mom was worried and asked me to check on you."

"You think this is the first time I've been sick in the last ten years?"

"Never said that."

"Okay, do you think this is the first time I've been sick while I've lived *here*?"

"Never said that either."

"Then why the fuck is this time different from all the other times I've been ill? Why are you fucking here, Arabella?"

CHAPTER 17

ARABELLA

I roll my eyes. “This is the first-time Mom mentioned you’ve ever been sick. It’s the holidays, and I didn’t like the thought of you being out here all alone.”

Eli moves further into the room. “I’ve been out here for years just fine.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“What do you mean you didn’t know that? Hasn’t it been fucking obvious every time you’ve gone to the house?”

“The last time I was at the house was your dad’s funeral.” I look away from him. “I thought you lived there.”

“Elena never told you I moved?”

“She mentions you from time to time, but she doesn’t go into detail.”

“But the first mention of me being sick, and you leap to come out here?” There’s a hint of bitterness in his tone. “What was that about? Hoping I’ve left you something in my will?”

I drop back onto the mattress with a groan, and stare at the ceiling. “Oh my god, what is wrong with you?” I suck in an irritated breath. “What do you want from me, Eli?”

“The truth.”

“I was worried about you.”

His eyebrow hikes.

“Okay, yes. Fine! I was also curious.”

Eli grunts. “You wanted to see how I was living? Compare it to your own perfect life?”

“I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Why?”

“I feel like we’re stuck on repeat.” Grabbing a pillow, I drag it over my head in frustration.

“Princess—”

That word sends me upright. I throw the pillow at his head. He catches it easily. “Don’t *Princess* me. You said you wanted space. And yet here you are ... invading mine.”

“Don’t avoid the question.”

“Why?” I snap, the anger inside me is hotter than lava. “I’m surprised you don’t have someone spying on me. Then you would have known I was coming.”

His lips curl into a cruel smile, his eyes as cold as the snow falling beyond the window. “You’re *not* that special, Princess. You wanted space, and I gave it to you in spades.”

“Yet we were practically joined at the hip when we were dating. You wanted to know who I was texting. Who I was talking to. Where I was going. You insisted on driving me everywhere. We were together twenty-four-seven all the damn time—”

“I was protecting you.”

“It wasn’t healthy, Eli.” I swing my legs off the mattress, and round the bed. “Evan went to *prison*. They locked him away. What were you protecting me from?”

I stop in front of him.

“What was I protecting you from? You even have to ask? Every other sick bastard out in the world.”

“You couldn’t protect me from the whole world.” I shake my head. “When I tried to reach out to you, you’re the one who told me to fuck off. Why are *you* in my room?”

He scowls. “I’m the one asking the questions.”

“You want a rundown of my life? Fine. I work in a fashion house in L.A. I have a comfortable apartment. My life is filled with workout classes, my art, and spending time with Miles when he’s not with his fiancé, Ivan.” I slap my hand against his chest and shove him back, but he doesn’t budge. “Is that what you wanted to know?”

“Not much time for your boyfriend.”

“Oh, so now we get to the bottom of what you really want to know.”

Eli laughs, the sound brittle. “I don’t fucking care.”

“No, Eli. I *don’t* have a boyfriend.”

“But you’ve had them, right?”

I grit my teeth at the accusation in his tone. “What do you

want me to say, Eli? Yes, I've dated other men since we broke up!"

And neither of them compared to you. They didn't touch me or kiss me the way you had. They didn't make me feel the way you did. They didn't mark me with their teeth. Or bruise me with their fingers. They didn't brand me so deeply that the claim is still there even though we've been apart for years.

"How many women have *you* fucked since then?"

Walking forward, he forces me to back up across the room until my back hits the wall. His hands land either side of my head, and he looms over me, lips curling in a sneer.

"Fucking. Dozens."

Even though it shouldn't hurt, his words slice me with the sharpness of a knife right in the chest. My heart rate picks up and the breath locks in my throat. The space between us is tense and heavy, with *something ... Something* I don't want to examine too closely. My arms won't move when I try to lift them and push him away.

His gaze roams over my face, and his eyes flare with something dark and violent. A muscle jumps in his jaw.

My lips part and I half expect him to lean in and kiss me, but he doesn't. Instead, he shoves away from the wall and walks out. I cross the room on shaking legs and close the door.

What just happened? We'd been arguing, and then something had changed.

Snatching my cell up off the mattress, I hit Miles' number, but it doesn't connect.

No. No. No.

Not only am I trapped in the cabin with Eli, I don't even have the luxury of contact with the outside world.

CHAPTER 18

ELI

She's not dating anyone.

I don't know why that eases some of the tension coursing through me. It shouldn't. I shouldn't give a fuck what's happening in her love life.

Or who she's fucking.

Or who's sharing her bed.

Or who's making her come.

My jaw clenches, teeth grinding together.

But you do give a fuck.

“Shut the fuck up!” The words leave my lips in a snarl, and I spin and bury my fist into the wall. The artwork adorning it shakes but doesn't fall.

I need to get out of here. Put some space between us. But I can't even escape to my gym or studio, unless ... My gaze shifts to the window.

I could climb out. I was thinking about doing it, anyway, so I can clear the snow from in front of the door. I get as far as opening the window, but when the first gust of wind hits it and slams it closed, almost taking off my fingers, I give it up as a bad idea.

I huff out an irritated breath.

Well, the bitch need not think I'm going to hide away in my fucking room just because *she* wants access to the rest of my house. It's *my* fucking house, not hers, and I'll spend time in whatever part of it I want.

I stalk out of my bedroom and down the hallway to the living room. There's music playing. That *fucking* radio. How come that can get a signal and my cell can't?

There's no sign of Arabella in the living room or the kitchen. I stride across and twist the knob on the radio, silencing it, and sure enough, that action brings her out from wherever she was hiding.

"I was listening to that."

"Don't fucking care. I like it to be quiet."

She glares at me. I fold my arms and glare right back at her.

"How soon after we broke up did you fuck another man?"

"What—"

"A week? A month? Longer?" I advance toward her.

"None of your business."

"When you said you needed space, a break to figure shit out, did you really mean you wanted to fuck someone else?"

She shakes her head, lips twisting in disgust. "I'm not doing this with you."

"Did you scream their name when you came? Did they tattoo your presence onto their body?"

The sharp crack as her palm hits my cheek echoes around the room. It takes a second for the pain to radiate across my face, but I'm already in motion. My hand shoots out and wraps around her throat, and I back her against the wall. I'm not holding her tight. She can breathe well enough, but her fingers claw at my wrists, pull at my fingers, to no avail.

I lower my head until our mouths are close together. "Just one flex, one *squeeze*, that's all it would take."

"Do you want to kill me, Eli?" To her credit, her voice is level, but I can see the fear in her eyes. The uncertainty of what I might be capable of. The realization that she no longer knows me.

"I want to do a lot of things, *Princess*." I tighten my grip, briefly cutting off her air flow, then release her and twist away.

Something bounces off the back of my head and I turn back to face her. Another cushion is on the floor near my feet.

"What the fuck is it with you throwing cushions at me?" I snap.

"Be glad we're not in the kitchen."

I wave a hand toward the door. "Go nuts. You've stabbed me in the back enough times. Once more won't make any difference."

"That's not fair, Eli."

"Nor were you."

She raises her hand to hit me again, but this time I grab her

wrist and shake my head.

“Enough. I don’t know what kind of men you’ve been dating, but this one doesn’t get off on being hit every time he says something you don’t like.”

“If I hit you *every* time you said something I didn’t like, you’d be dead.”

“Maybe I should just stop talking to you then.”

“Maybe you should.”

Even *I* can hear how childish we both sound. I push past her and walk into the kitchen. If I’m going to get through this, I need a fucking drink. Throwing open cabinet doors, I find a bottle of bourbon, grab a glass, and fill it to the brim.

“Is this what you do out here? Drink before lunch?”

I whirl around to find her in the doorway. Holding her gaze, I lift the glass to my lips and drain it.

“Only when I have unwanted house guests.” I reach behind me for the bottle and refill my glass.

“Guess that explains why you looked like a homeless person when I arrived.”

I lift the glass to her in a mock salute. “You’ve got me all figured out, Princess.”

“Stop calling me that!”

I smirk. “Why? All you need is a cheerleader outfit and you’ll look like all the girls back in school, again. You

remember them, right? The ones who you desperately wanted to fit in with.” I take another large swallow of bourbon. “How about a toast? To all those guys you spread your legs for. Did you learn any new tricks?”

“I learned that not all relationships are based on control and fear.”

The alcohol sloshes over the side of my glass when I laugh. “Congratu-fucking-lations. Let’s drink to that.” Another mouthful of bourbon burns its way down my throat.

“What about you? What did you learn from the *dozens* of women you’ve been with?”

I slam the glass down and fill it up again. “That’s an easy question to answer. I learned that it doesn’t matter how good you make someone feel, or how much you love them, they’re all going to fucking leave you in the end.”

CHAPTER 19

ARABELLA

Images of Eli, naked in bed, pleasuring other women fill my head, and jealousy eats away at me.

I let him go. I shouldn't care who he fucked.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him how long it took him to invite someone else to his bed, but I don't.

I'm not about to tell him it took four fucking years before I slept with someone again. That even then, the armor that had grown over my heart wouldn't crack. That trusting someone with my body was impossible. In the end, the few times I had sex hadn't been enough for me. Because Eli had ruined me for every other man.

I watch him down another glass of bourbon, his gaze locked on mine the whole time.

"So, you're just going to drink yourself into the bottom of that bottle? Is this how you deal with all your problems?"

Eli refills his glass. "It's how I'm going to deal with the problem standing in front of me."

"At least eat something first."

"Don't act like you're my fucking mother."

"Then act like a grownup," I snap.

Swirling the contents of his glass, he gulps it down.

“Slow down. You’ll make yourself sick.” The words leave me begrudgingly. I don’t want to see him flat on his face on the floor.

Eli smirks and tops up his glass. “Scared I might touch you if I’m drunk enough?”

Crossing my arms, I lean against the door. “You’re in for a shock if you try.”

I hadn’t expected him to put his hand around my neck earlier, and I froze. But this time I’ll be prepared if he does it again. The gut reaction of fear I’d felt has settled but it’s left me on high alert.

This older version of Eli is angrier, more volatile, than the one I remember. His emotions are fiercer, unpredictable, and erratic.

A pang of sadness sweeps through me. It’s because Kellan has gone. The other boy had been his balance. The cool-headed one who kept Eli calm and focused.

He gives me a once-over, his smile derisive. “I’ve already had my hand wrapped around your pretty little throat. What are you going to do, Princess? Hit me with another pillow?”

“No, next time I’ll have you on your ass.” My response is calm and cool.

“Sure, you will.”

The bottle of bourbon is half empty, and he doesn’t seem to be slowing down. I sigh and straighten, then advance into the

kitchen.

“What the fuck are you doing now?” he growls.

“I’m going to make you a turkey sandwich.”

“I’m not hungry.”

I ignore him, open the refrigerator door, and find the leftovers from yesterday’s dinner.

“You can’t drink on an empty stomach. I’ve been through this with Elena, I know what I’m talking about.”

And I’m not sure I want to see you drunk and angry, I add silently.

The memory of my mother drinking when I was younger isn’t one I like to think about. After so many years of her being an absent parent, she finally made an effort to be one after she married Eli’s dad. It took time, but eventually we managed to build a better relationship.

I take out the plate of sliced turkey wrapped in saran wrap, kick the refrigerator shut, then move to the counter. I’ve barely set it down when a heavy hand lands on my shoulder.

“I said I’m *not* fucking hungry.”

I grab Eli’s hand, spin around and twist his wrist as I move behind him to pin his arm behind his back.

He freezes in place. “What the fuck?”

A little rush of power zips through me, and I tighten my grip. “You are going to *eat* the sandwich I make you. *Then* you

can drink yourself under the table.”

“Or what? You’ll break my arm?”

I release him. “Of course not.”

Eli stares at me, eyes narrow, through the loose strands of hair hanging over his face while he rubs his wrist.

“Where the hell did you learn that?”

I find the bread and pull out a couple of slices. “Self-defense classes.”

Silence.

A quick peek shows him opening his mouth like he’s about to ask me a question. When he sees me looking, he scowls instead. He picks up his glass and nurses his bourbon against his chest.

I put the sandwich together, then make one for myself.

I slid it in front of him. “Here.”

Eli makes no effort to even look at it. “You just wasted your time.”

I shrug. “I have nothing better to do.”

“So, you’re just going to keep harassing me?”

I walk back to the counter, and collect my plate, and a drink. “You’re so fucking stubborn. Eat it. Don’t eat it.”

“Pot calling the kettle black.” Eli salutes me with his glass.

The urge to slap the smirk off his face is hard to resist. I

leave him to his drinking and go and sit on the couch. Switching the radio back on, I find the only station that it picks up with non-stop rock bands playing. It's enough to drown out the muttering I can hear coming from the kitchen.

Eli's earlier words echo in my head.

I learned that it doesn't matter how good you make someone feel, or how much you love them, they're all going to fucking leave you in the end.

I'd never meant to hurt him. Not that he will believe me, no matter how many times I tell him that.

CHAPTER 20

ELI

I wrap the sandwich up and put it back in the refrigerator. I'm not hungry, but it would be stupid to waste food. Topping up my glass, I move to the other room. She's curled on one end of the couch, nibbling on a corner of the bread. I don't have to look at her to know her eyes are following me as I cross the room and walk down the hallway, glass in one hand and bottle in the other.

I place the glass on the nightstand and flop down onto my bed, throwing a hand over my face.

How the fuck had we got to this point?

Let her think I'm an alcoholic. I don't give a fuck.

The truth is, I rarely drink. I don't like how it feels or the lack of control. But my choices are limited—either seek the numbness of alcohol or let her presence continue to rattle me.

Rattle me.

I snort. After ten years, she shouldn't be able to get under my skin. Not like this. She made her choice when she walked away from me.

She said you were smothering her.

I roll onto my side. I wasn't smothering her; I was protecting her. There was a risk that Evan would get away with everything he'd done.

The risk was low. There was too much evidence.

Like that mattered. A good lawyer could have spun it to look like he was the victim.

That's not the real reason and you know it.

I twist again so I'm lying on my stomach.

You didn't like how happy she always seemed to be around Miles and Garrett. That's why you're being so aggressive to her now. Just admit it.

Does it matter? She chose to leave. Chose to walk away. Chose to end our relationship. The one thing she *didn't* choose was me.

And that's what it comes down to.

I was never her choice.

You were both kids dealing with some seriously messed up shit. Do you really think either of you were going to react normally to anything after that? Processing everything you both went through was going to take years of therapy. And that's not even touching the way you treated her to begin with.

I groan and bury my head into the pillow.

She still abandoned me.

She chose to heal.

She left me behind.

She needed to find her own strength.

She never came back once she did all that.

Didn't she? She came to your dad's funeral. What did you say to her, Eli?

I'd just lost my father. How did she expect me to react?

You reacted the same way when you opened the door to her here. What's your excuse for that?

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling.

She nursed you, fed you, looked after you ... have you thanked her?

"Fuck's sake."

No, you haven't. You've been aggressive, cruel, antagonistic.

In my defense, so has she.

Eli!

Fine. I'll apologize. But not until I no longer stink of bourbon. She won't believe I mean it if I'm not sober.

The crash of thunder jolts me out of sleep. Lightning flashes, lighting up the room.

Great.

Not only are we snowed in by a blizzard, but the universe has also decided to add thundersnow to the mix.

Thunder rumbles again, followed by another flash of lightning. I roll off the bed and move to the window to peer

outside. Everywhere is dark, brightened only by the lightning for a couple of seconds, showing me deep snow and dark sky.

Fuck.

I spin toward the door, then stop.

Nah, Arabella won't still be scared of storms. It's been ten years ... She'll be fine ...won't she?

The next crash of thunder sounds and is immediately followed by lightning. The storm must be directly overhead.

I should check on her.

My gaze shifts to the door again.

She's a grown woman. She probably fucked away her fear of storms years ago.

I'm out of the bedroom and knocking on her door before the thought has finished forming.

“Arabella?”

There's no answer.

“I'm coming in.” I wait for a beat and then twist the handle and push the door open. A flash of lightning lights up the room as I walk inside, displaying an empty room. “Arabella?” I turn in a slow circle and come to a stop facing the bed. The duvet is missing.

I frown.

The room doesn't have any walk-in closets so she can't be hiding in one of those.

So where is she?

I step out of the room and check the living room and kitchen. She's not in either. Would she have gone into one of the other guest rooms? I dismiss that idea straight away. It wouldn't make sense. That leaves ... My gaze shifts to the bathroom door.

I spot her the second I open it. She's hard to miss.

Well, that's not strictly true. The *duvet* covering her body is hard to miss. I stride across the tiled floor and scoop her, duvet and all, out of the tub. Her arms wrap around my neck and her face buries itself against my throat.

“It's okay, baby. I've got you.”

CHAPTER 21

ARABELLA

I cling to him; his body is solid and safe. I'm shaking with panic, and in my head I'm that little girl trapped in a dark house alone in the middle of a storm all over again. Another boom of thunder roars somewhere above the cabin, and I shriek.

"It can't hurt you, you know that." He murmurs into my hair as he carries me out of the bathroom. "You're safe."

I don't care where he's taking me as long as he doesn't leave me alone. All my anger and pain are swept away in a primitive need for protection against the storm. It's been years since I've experienced panic like this.

"I ... I tried counting like you showed me, but it was getting closer." My voice is small. I keep my eyes screwed shut. "So, I ran in here."

"You remember me telling you that?"

I nod against his neck. "I didn't forget."

Something soft meets my back. "Baby, you need to let me go."

Is he crazy? I'm never letting him go. Ever.

I tighten my grip on his neck. "No."

He chuckles. "As impressed as I am by your octopus

impression, you have to let me go so I can get into bed.”

“Oh.” Opening my eyes, I still can’t see anything, but I’m sure he’s lowered me onto a bed. I reluctantly release my hold on him, and scoot back.

He climbs onto the mattress beside me. The second he’s in place, I lunge for him, wrapping my arms and legs around his body. He drags the covers up and bundles us up in its warmth.

A hand strokes my back. “Honey, you don’t need to hug me that hard. Or is this a new tactic? Are you trying to break my ribs?”

“Sorry.” Just as I loosen my grip, another boom of thunder sounds. “Can you turn the lamp on, please?”

Eli’s fingers trace a pattern over my shoulders through my t-shirt. “Why?”

“Because I don’t like the dark.”

“You were never afraid of it before.”

“I know,” I whisper, his scent and heat enveloping me. “I just need the light on. Please, Eli.”

Because I’m already frightened and the memories of the psychopath who terrorized me are close to the surface. I should tell him that being stuck in the dark during a storm makes me feel as though I’m trapped in Churchill Bradley’s tomb all over again, desperately clawing to get out, but I can’t get the words out.

Eli moves, and the light flicks on. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

The soft glow eases a little of the tension from my body. We’re in his bedroom and not the guestroom I’m staying in.

This is Eli’s bed.

“Do you keep a light on at home?”

Resting my head on his chest, I listen to the reassuring thud of his heart. “We rarely get thunderstorms in L.A. It’s why I moved there, but I have a nightlight I use. Miles got it for me. It’s in the shape of a unicorn and sits on my side in the bedroom.”

“A unicorn?” His voice is edged with amusement.

I nod. “It’s white, with a pink mane, and has a multi-colored horn.”

“Why am I not surprised he got you one of those?”

“He’s a good friend.”

“Where do you hide if you do get a storm?” There’s a note of curiosity in his tone.

“The closet, with the door ajar,” I admit quietly. “I tried under the bed, but I got claustrophobic because I couldn’t move and felt trapped.”

“Do you have nightmares a lot?”

“All the time.”

Another crashing boom of thunder explodes above our heads, and I swear the force of it shakes the walls of the cabin.

I shriek, and crawl on top of Eli under the covers and tangle my limbs around him again. Something hard pokes into my thigh, but I'm too frightened to think about what it is.

“Arabella.” Eli's groan is low and tortured.

“Don't let me go.” I plead, digging my nails into his t-shirt.
“Please, don't leave me on my own.”

CHAPTER 22

ELI

Why the fuck did I bring her to my bedroom?

I should have taken her into the living room and sat her on the couch. In what fucking reality was putting her in my bed the best idea?

Another crash of thunder has her flattening herself on top of me with a scream.

Any second now and she's going to feel my dick pressing into her thigh and lose her shit. But at least it'll take her mind off the storm.

I press my hand against her spine, roll onto my side and try to put some distance between us. Her arms lock around my waist.

"Where are you going?" Her voice shakes.

"Nowhere. But honey, you need to relax your grip a little." I reach back to loosen the death grip she has on the back of my shirt.

"No, you're going to leave me here alone."

"I'm not going to leave you." I clamp my jaw closed before I follow that up with pointing out that she was the one who'd left me. This isn't the time.

Instead, I smooth my palm up and down her spine. "Do you

remember when your mom forced us to spend the day together? We ended up staying in a hotel for the night.”

She nods against my chest.

“You smoked your first joint. You remember that?”

Another nod.

“I need you to let go of me for a second. I promise, I’m not going anywhere, I just need to move.”

“You promise you’re not going to leave me?”

I dip my head and press my lips to her hair. “I swear. I’m not going anywhere.”

Her arms relax, and I turn until my back is to her and stretch out a hand to pull open the drawer on my nightstand. The thunderstorm is still crashing overhead, and as I rummage in the drawer, Arabella scoots forward and plasters herself to my back. I can’t help the laugh which escapes me. Patting the hand clutching at the shirt over my stomach, I finally find the small box I’m searching for and take it out. Carefully untangling myself from her grip, I sit up and open the lid. Inside are two rolled joints, and a lighter. I take one out, pop it between my lips, light it and take in a lungful of the smoke.

“Sit up, honey.” I tip my head against the wall and exhale, feeling the drug go to work while the mattress bounces as Arabella moves around.

When she’s sitting up beside me, I pass her the joint. “Take a hit. It’ll make you feel better.”

I watch while she lifts it to her lips, draws in the smoke and holds it for a beat before exhaling. We pass it between us in silence until I feel her relax beside me.

“Feel better?” I drape my arm over her shoulders and tug her closer to me. She doesn’t resist, burrowing into my side and dropping her head against my chest.

“A little.” She jumps at the clap of thunder and counts softly.

“There. See? The storm is moving away now.”

Her cheek rubs against my chest as she nods. “Why do you have weed next to your bed?”

I don’t answer her straight away, taking a pull on the joint and holding it in my lungs until it starts to burn. The smoke seeps out from between my lips when I reply.

“You’re not the only one who had to find a way to deal with nightmares, Kitten.”

There’s a weight pinning me to the bed when I wake up. My throat feels rough, my eyes heavy, and there’s a thickness in my head that typically comes from a bad night’s sleep. I force my lids to part, and it takes some time for the ceiling to come into focus. When my vision clears, so does the thickness in my head, bringing back the memories of the night before.

The thunderstorm. Finding Arabella in the bathroom. Sharing a joint. Everything after that is fuzzy. We must have

fallen asleep. My hand seeks out the weight across my chest and encounters silky hair.

Fuck.

At my touch she moves, turning her head, and lets out a soft sigh that I feel across my throat ... and my dick immediately springs to life.

Double fuck.

I need to get out of the bed before she notices, because there's no way she'll accept it as morning wood. She'll accuse me of something nefarious, and then we'll get into another fight.

Inch by inch, I ease myself out from beneath her, then climb out of the bed. I'm by the door before she speaks.

“Eli?” Her voice is drowsy. “Where are you going?”

I stare at the door in front of me, take in a quiet breath, and then turn to face her. “Bathroom, then coffee.”

She pushes up and I can't help but look at her. Her blonde hair is a tumble of messy curls framing her face, the t-shirt she's wearing falls off one shoulder. She looks like a sleepy angel, with pouting lips and deep blue eyes.

“Come back to bed.” She pats the mattress.

I shake my head. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

Her lips move into a small pout. “Why not? It's warm and I'm not ready to get up yet.”

“Then stay there until you are.”

“But I want you to stay here, too.” She tilts her head and licks her lips. “Please?”

“No.” I turn back toward the door.

“I think we should have sex.”

“I—*what?*” *Did I just hear correctly?* I spin back around. “What did you say?”

She shifts position, kneeling up. “Hear me out. It makes sense.”

“On *what* fucking planet does that suggestion make sense?”

“Closure. We were together and then we weren’t. We had no time to really end things. It would give us closure.”

I’m gaping at her. I can feel my jaw hanging. Snapping my teeth closed with an audible click, I shake my head.

“We’re both adults. Come on, Eli. For old times’ sake.”

“Old times sake?” I’m repeating her words like a fucking moron. “You want to have sex with me for closure and *old times sake?*” My hand lifts to rub the back of my neck and I shake my head again. “I think you’re still high from the joint.”

“I’m not high. I think it’d help us both to move on.”

“Move on.” My voice is flat and I’m *still* fucking echoing what she’s saying.

She scrambles off the bed and comes toward me. I’ve never wanted to bolt so fucking fast in my entire life. My mind is

screaming that it's a trap, that nothing good is going to come of me even considering her suggestion.

I grope behind me for the doorknob and yank it open. "I'm going to take a shower." I step backward out of the room.

"But Eli—"

"No." I stride down the hallway to the bathroom, step inside and lock the door. Spinning, I lean against it and blow out a breath.

No fucking way.

I'm not even going to entertain the idea. Not because I don't want her. I *do*. But because I know that the second I have her again, there's no way I'm going to let her go.

CHAPTER 23

ARABELLA

I stand outside the bathroom door. No matter how much he might want to deny it, I'd felt his erection this morning. The steel hard length against my hip. A painful ache had spread through me when I woke up, and I'd been filled with the need to have him inside me again. I'm sure that being intimate with him would fill the emptiness I've been living with for the past ten years.

He held me through the night. Kept me from drowning in a panic attack. I can't help but believe it means something. That he *still* feels something for me.

Was the sex between us really as good as I remember, or did I imagine it?

Eli was the first boy I'd slept with. But that's what he was. A boy, not a man.

Could he really have been as good as I remember? Am I looking back with rose-tinted glasses, my mind making it out to be more than it was?

Neither of us got closure. Now that we're older and more mature, surely we can handle the intense intimacy we'd shared. No messy emotions, just the physical side one last time before we both walk away. Maybe it will finally exorcize the tangle of emotions still between us.

Decision made, I try the handle, but the bathroom door is locked. “Eli?”

“Go away.”

“Please, hear me out.”

“No.”

“But we have the perfect opportunity here.”

“Not interested.”

The muffled sound of water running comes from behind the door. An image of Eli’s muscled, naked, tattooed body slick under the shower fills my head. My body is warm all over.

Maybe he’ll be more inclined to listen if I feed him.

I make my way into the kitchen, get the coffee started and dig a packet of bacon and a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator.

Eli wanders into the room just as I’m filling two plates. He’s dressed in a pair of sweats that ride low on his hips. His chest is bare, tattoos on display, and it makes me pause for a second. Yet another difference between the boy and the man. The boy would never have walked around shirtless.

His dark hair is damp, the wet strands curling at the ends and it’s long enough to brush over his shoulders every time he turns his head. I take one of the plates and a cup of coffee over to the table, as he takes a seat.

He eyes me for a second before his attention drops to the

fried bacon, eggs, and toast heaped on his plate. “If you think you can seduce me with food, think again.”

I grab my plate and cup, and then join him. “No, I just like cooking, and after last night, this is my way of saying thank you for taking care of me.”

“I don’t need your gratitude.”

“Well, you still have it.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes before I speak again.

“I wasn’t joking about the sex.”

Eli sighs. “I said no.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a stupid idea.”

I frown at him. “We’re both consenting adults. Not kids anymore.”

“All the more reason not to do it.” He chews and swallows.

“We both have pent-up emotions, and this could be the perfect way to vent them.”

“Fucking is therapy now?”

I shake my head and cut into one of my eggs. “Come on, Eli. Don’t you ever wonder if what was between us was just fueled by adrenaline and teenage hormones? Was the sex even that good, or have we built it up in our heads?”

“One joint has turned you into a raging nymphomaniac. I

forgot about that quirky little side effect.” He keeps his eyes down, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“No! It just made me see things clearly. Neither of us has moved on. Not completely.”

One corner of his mouth curls up. “From what you told me, you’ve moved on just fine.”

I study his face. “Stop hiding behind your anger like it’s a shield. Do you want fucking closure, or do you want to continue like this until you die out here, a lonely, bitter, old man?”

Movements precise, he puts his fork down, and wipes his mouth with the napkin beside his plate. “No, Arabella. I *don’t* want closure, by fucking or otherwise.”

“I’m not an eighteen-year-old virgin anymore. I’m a twenty-eight-year-old woman asking you to fuck me.”

“And I’m a twenty-eight-year-old man telling you no.”

“At least give me a reason.”

Tongue flicking out to play with his lip ring, he pins me with a steady, intense green-eyed gaze. “Because you don’t *want* me to fuck you, not really.” He doesn’t smile. “You just want to relive the past. Maybe get another taste of the excitement of sneaking out to do something taboo.”

I point my fork at him. “Or I think closure would be a healthy choice for both of us.”

He tips his head, studying me. “If we *did* fuck ... and I’m

not saying I agree ... It wouldn't be sweet or gentle. I wouldn't have to pretend to fuck you like I hate you, Arabella." He pushes to his feet and leans across the table. "Because I *do*. I do fucking hate you. There would be no pleasure in it. I'd just be using you to get off."

I should be scared, and a tiny part of me is, but I can't deny the insidious thread of excitement that coils through me. I tip my head up and meet his eyes.

"I'm a big girl. I can handle whatever you throw at me."

"Really?" He hikes an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Hate sex." His gaze fastens on my mouth as my tongue sweeps nervously over my lips.

I nod. "We've been there before."

"Not like this. I'm not a boy anymore."

"I'm well aware of that."

"Are we finally getting to the real reason you came out here?" The question is silky.

I blink. "What?"

"For sex. Couldn't you find a man to satisfy your needs in L.A.?"

"Of course, it's not that. You know why I came. Because Mom said you were sick. How long has it been since you've been with a woman?"

“None of your fucking business.”

“What if I said you can set the rules?”

“Rules? What rules?”

“For what we do.” I prop my chin on my fist and smile at him. “You always liked to be the one in control. I’m willing to give you that.”

“You’d give me control of your body?”

I nod.

“For closure?” His voice is dry.

I nod again.

He snorts a laugh.

“You agree, then?”

“Of course, I fucking don’t.”

“But you just said—”

He slams his coffee mug to the table and nails me with a glare.

“Alright. I’ll fuck you.” He lifts a finger when I smile. “On *my* terms. I will be the one in total control. Anything goes. Whatever I feel like doing, for as long as I want to do it. There’ll be no red or green. No safe words. No stopping. Just taking whatever I want to give you.” His voice is hard. “Your pussy, your mouth, your ass. Any position. *Everything* I want to do to you, and you will do it without complaint. We’ll be done when I say we’re done. If you agree to that, there will be

no backing out once we've started."

My eyes narrow on his face. "Is that a dare?"

He smirks. "Is that what you need it to be to turn you on?"

"No, I know what I want." I force myself to look away and take a sip of my coffee.

Eli is trying to scare me, but it's not working. The more he talks about what he wants to do to me, the more my body responds. Throbbing and pulsing with a need that makes me press my thighs together.

Why hasn't any other man ever had this kind of effect on me?

CHAPTER 24

ELI

I sit back down on my chair, mug of coffee held to my lips and look at her over the rim. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes bright, bottom lip almost being chewed in two by her teeth.

“So, tell me, Arabella. What do *you* want?”

“I’ve already told you what I want.”

“Right ... closure.” I take a sip of coffee.

Are you seriously considering taking her up on this? It’s a stupid idea. One that’ll only end up with you being hurt again. Cut her off. Tell her no.

“I don’t think you’re serious.”

She folds her arms and glares at me. “Oh, I’m very serious.”

“Prove it.” I set down my mug.

“How?”

“Strip.”

Her lips part. Her tongue sweeps over them. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Take your clothes off. Right now.”

“*Here?*”

I arch an eyebrow. “What’s wrong? Scared the neighbors might see you?” I give an exaggerated look around. “Don’t know if you looked outside this morning, Princess, but there’s

very little risk of a peeping Tom today.” I lean forward and tap my fingers onto the tabletop. “You want a closure fuck. I laid down the terms of you getting it. You either want it or you don’t. If you don’t, then stop wasting my fucking time. If you do, then you know what to do.”

“You want me to take my clothes off in the kitchen?”

“Do you need me to be more specific?”

I don’t think she’ll do it. She’s just trying to get under my skin. If I call her bluff, she’ll leave me the fuck alone until the snow has melted enough to get her ass back to the nearest town.

You’ve forgotten what a stubborn wench she is.

The thought is accompanied by Arabella’s chair scraping against the floor. She stands and steps away from the table. I pick up my mug and settle back on my seat, waiting for her to walk past me and out of the room.

Instead, she pulls her t-shirt over her head and tosses it onto my lap. She’s wearing a lacy purple bra beneath it. She puts her hands on her hips and stares at me. I say nothing, but let my gaze drop to the waistband of her pants. I can see the hint of a tattoo peeking out. I flick my tongue piercing against my teeth.

“Are you done?”

Her lips thin and she shakes her head, then hooks her fingers into her yoga pants and drags them down her legs. They pool

at her feet, and she steps out of them, leaving her in a matching bra and panty set.

“Cute.” I smirk at her and lift a hand, twirling one finger. “Spin for me. Show me what I’m working with.”

I catch a flash of angry eyes before she presents me with her back. There’s a tramp stamp across the small of her back, not as large as some I’ve seen and the script work is elegant. I fight not to smile when I read the word.

Hellcat.

“Face me.”

My gaze drifts over the butterfly tattoo I’d taken her to get all those years ago, up over her arms, down her chest, pausing on the small raven taking flight off one hip. I ignore the sharp stab of pain it sends through my heart. I know who it represents.

I lift my gaze to meet her eyes. “Remove the rest.”

She reaches back to unhook her bra and lets it fall, then pulls her panties down. There’s nothing sexy about her actions. This isn’t a strip tease. It’s a challenge.

I lower my gaze to her legs. There’s another tattoo on her inner thigh—a cat with bright eyes, one red and one green.

“Put your hands behind your head and spread your legs.”

Her blue eyes are spitting fire, but she does as I say. I run my tongue over my bottom lip and spot a flicker of a smile tug at her lips.

She thinks I'm falling into her game. That I'll give her what she wants.

I let my gaze dip down, over her breasts, her stomach past her navel and pause between her legs. Unlike her eighteen-year-old self, she has a neat landing strip of pubic hair leading the way down to her pussy.

“Well, at least you learned how to landscape. If I decide to eat out, I won't have to bring a flashlight with me to find your clit.”

Her entire body lights up in a blush. I hide a smile and turn my back on her to finish my breakfast. When I'm done, I glance back at her. Her eyes are burning their way through my skull. I push my plate away and stand up.

“Clean up the mess, then come through to the other room.”

She crouches for her clothes.

“Oh, no, Hellcat. You're proving that this whole closure via fucking thing is your chosen course of action. No clothes for you until you either say you're done, or until I say you can.”

I walk out of the room without another glance in her direction. With any luck, I've humiliated her enough that when I next see her, she'll be dressed and rushing into the guestroom, where she'll remain until it's time to leave.

I'm sitting on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, when she reappears.

For fuck's sake. She's *still* naked.

“Sit down.” I wave to the single armchair.

She perches on the edge of it. I smile.

“You’re not convincing me of your commitment to the cause. Sit back, open your legs. Let me see what you’re trying to seduce me with.”

She slides back onto the cushion and, holding my gaze, lifts one leg and hooks it over the arm of the chair. My jaw clenches. The position opens her up, hides nothing from me. Her pussy is pink, glistening, *wet*. My dick strains against my pants, wanting nothing more than to reacquaint itself with its favorite place to be.

“What now?” Her voice is a husky whisper. “Do you want me to touch myself? Make myself come for you? I know you *love* to watch me play.” There’s a glint to her eyes that makes me wonder if she knows what I’m doing. “I can see how hard you are. Don’t you want me to come over there so you can fuck me?”

“What’s the hurry, Princess? Think all it’ll take is one quick fuck to get that closure you want so much?”

“You could take your pants off and let me suck your cock.”

“I could, or you could crawl over here and take out my dick yourself.”

She slides off the armchair and onto her hands and knees.

“Just remember, sweetheart, the second my dick touches your lips, it means you’re accepting my terms. Everything I

want, for as long as I want, until I say it's over.”

CHAPTER 25

ARABELLA

I can see the challenge in Eli's eyes. He thinks I'm not going to go through with this. If I have to seduce him into fucking me, I will. I'm not going to change my mind.

Crawling toward him across the wooden floor, I sway my ass as I move. He remains still, as I move closer and closer. When I reach his legs, I take them off the coffee table and lower them to the ground.

I smile up at him, lick my lips and spread his thighs with my hands, so I can crawl between them. "Are you hard for me, Eli?"

Eli's expression seems to be carved from stone. "Why don't you find out for yourself?"

My hands slide up his thighs, over the waistband of his sweats and I run my nails lightly over his abs.

He captures my wrists and lowers them back down to his thighs. "I never gave you permission to touch me anywhere else. Just your mouth on my dick."

I pout. "But I want to explore you with my hands and tongue."

All the new tattoos he has. Every dip and curve of muscle that I felt under me when I was lying on top of him last night. I know exactly what I want from him.

“That’s not what I told you to do.”

“Eli—”

“If you’re not going to do this my way, then we’re done. Go and put your clothes on.”

“I’m not stopping.”

“Then do as I fucking tell you.”

I settle my hands on the front of his sweatpants and curl my fingers around the hard length of his cock. Stroking it through the cloth, I smile when he groans.

“Mouth,” Eli rasps. “Not your fucking hand. You might as well give up now if you can’t stick to the rules I’ve laid down.”

“You know better than that. I followed all your rules in the past.”

A nerve jumps in his jaw. “When *Sin* asked you to do things.”

“When *you* asked me.” I’m not sure why I find it important to remind him that Sin is just another side of him, but I do. “I was playing those games with you, *Eli*. No one else.”

I’ve seen some of the demons he’s still battling. As much as I want to fix him, I know the only one who can help Eli is himself. He needs to work through them, and all I can hope is giving him this will help banish some of his pain. I might have started out wanting Sin once, but I’d come to love Eli.

I slide my hands to the waistband of his sweats, and tug them down. He lifts his hips so I can pull his sweatpants and boxer briefs down his thighs. His cock is standing to attention, thick and proud and I can't take my eyes off it.

Has it always been that big?

His fingers flex against the couch cushions, but he still makes no move to touch me.

How far will I have to go to break that iron-like control? He's stubborn, but everyone has a breaking point. I want him to want me as much as I want him. With a primal need that won't be stopped until it's sated.

Naked between his legs, on my knees, I lean forward, wrap one hand around his cock and move my mouth to the tip. I keep eye contact with him, as I swipe my tongue over him.

A flicker of ... something ... sparks in the depths of his eyes.

Lips parting, I suck the crown of his dick into my mouth, then slowly inch by inch, take his length down my throat.

CHAPTER 26

ELI

Any minute now she'll stand up, get dressed, and walk away.

When she crawls across the floor, pulls my dick out and opens her mouth, I almost call a halt myself. But then her lips slide over the tip and the sheer pleasure of it wipes any thought of pushing her away from my mind.

Contrary to what I'd told her, I *haven't* fucked my way through dozens of women since we broke up. In fact, since moving out to the cabin permanently, I haven't been with anyone at all.

My gaze refocuses on her head bobbing up and down in front of me, the sensation of her lips sliding up and down my dick, and her tongue licking over me. Her eyelashes have lowered, shielding her eyes, and I tip my head back against the couch.

Has she always felt this good?

I can remember the first time she sucked my dick, her hesitancy, her eagerness. She shows no sign of discomfort now, though.

How many times has she done this since leaving me? How many others has she been in this position for?

I must make a sound because her eyelids lift, and she pauses in her sucking. I glare at her.

“Stop.” I tangle a hand in her hair and pull her off before she can move.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“How many dicks have you sucked since we broke up?”

She sighs. “Eli, we’ve been through this.”

“Answer me.”

“No.”

My grip on her hair tightens. “Stand up.” I don’t wait, rising to my feet and pulling her up with me.

“You’re hurting me.”

“Anything I want,” I remind her, my voice grim.

“So that’s what the plan is? To hurt me?”

“It should be.” I loosen my fingers and drop my hand. “*You* hurt me. It’s only fair that I return the favor, but no.” I pull up my underwear and sweats, then step past her. “Come with me.”

I walk along the hallway until I reach the guestroom she’s been staying in and throw open the door.

“Inside.”

“Are you going to walk away from me?” She slips past me and enters the bedroom.

I shake my head. “No. But I’m not giving you a closure fuck in my bed.”

Closure fuck. There will *never* be closure between us. She's too deep under my skin for that.

Are you really going to go through with this? You know the minute you get a taste of her, you're not going to want to let her go again.

I ignore the voice in my head and follow Arabella into the room, kicking the door shut behind me. I prop my back against the door, and fold my arms, watching as she moves deeper into the room. She makes no attempt to conceal her body. Her hands are loose at her sides, her hips swaying as she walks toward the bed. When she reaches it, she turns to face me.

I can't help but compare the woman in front of me with the girl I'd gone out of my way to ruin, and then fallen in love with ten years ago. There's barely any trace of the shy virgin any longer. She's confident, at ease with her body, unconcerned by the fact I'm looking at her.

"Enjoying the view?"

My eyes shift from her breasts to her face. "You're more toned than you used to be."

"I work out a lot."

"Self-defense classes." I think back to her grabbing my wrist.

She nods. "And kickboxing."

"So, you're a badass these days?" I'm not even being sarcastic. I *like* that she's taken steps to make sure she's

protected.

A sad smile pulls her lips up briefly. “Let’s just say I won’t be as easily overpowered now as I was back then.” She sits on the edge of the mattress. “You don’t have to make conversation, you know. I’m a sure thing.”

My gaze dips back to her breasts, her nipples hard and pointed, then down over her stomach, and settles between her legs. She shifts position, giving me a brief glimpse of her pussy before crossing one leg over the other.

“You seem very eager to get my dick inside you.” I push away from the wall and cross the room to stand in front of her.

“And for all your talk of doing whatever you want to me, you don’t seem very interested in touching me at all.” She leans back, propping herself up on her elbows. “What’s wrong, Eli? Been hiding in the woods for so long that you’ve forgotten what to do with your cock?”

“My dick works just fine, thank you.”

She tips up her chin and smirks. “Prove it, then.”

I take another step forward, and nudge her legs apart with my knee so I can stand between them. Her tongue licks across her lips, and she tilts her head back to look up at me. The pose triggers the artist in me. I want to capture her just like this—blue eyes dark, lips full and pouting, nipples hard and begging to be sucked— and I know that once she’s gone and I’m alone again, this moment will inspire a hundred images.

I trace over her lips with one finger, along her jaw and then slide my hand into her hair and pull her head back further.

“Last chance to back out.”

Her hand lifts to squeeze my dick through my sweats. “Fuck me like you hate me, Eli.”

Bending, I press my lips to her ear. “I’m going to fuck you *because* I hate you, Arabella.”

My teeth graze over her ear, and I nip *hard* on the lobe. She gives a soft moan.

“Take out my dick.”

Her fingers dive beneath the waistband of my sweats and curl around my erection. She gives a couple of slow pumps, then drags my sweats and boxers down over my thighs with her other hand. My dick springs up. Arabella licks her lips.

“Suck it.”

Her lips curve up into a smile, before they part to let her tongue come out to flick over the tip, and then I’m engulfed inside the warm, wetness of her mouth. I bite back a groan.

So, you’re dead set on this? You’re going to fuck her and then let her go?

I squash the voice down ruthlessly. Now isn’t the time to get into an argument with someone who isn’t there.

My hips jerk forward, driving my dick deeper down her throat, and I tighten my grip on her hair, holding her head still

while I fuck her mouth like it's her pussy. She doesn't stop me, doesn't fight. In fact, she does the opposite. Her hands clutch my thighs, nails biting deep with every thrust. Her tongue laps at my length, licking and sucking and making contented little humming sounds like I'm her favorite meal.

I angle my head, watching my dick sliding in and out of her mouth. My nerves are tightening, the desire to come dancing like fire through my veins, but I wrestle against it.

Too soon. Not yet. Not now.

Her nails scrape a path over my ass, down my thighs, and I grit my teeth, forcing myself to drag her mouth off my dick before I lose control.

"Hands and knees." I bark the words, shoving her away from me. "Spread your legs. Show me how desperate you are."

"Eli." My name is a protest.

"What I want, when I want, *how* I want," I remind her. "Hands and fucking knees."

She rolls onto her stomach, and slowly lifts onto her hands and knees.

"Lower your head. I want your ass in the air, face on the pillow."

She shifts position.

"Spread your legs."

Her legs part, and I reach forward to rest my palm on the

curve of her ass.

“Do you remember the spanking I gave you in school?”

She tenses beneath my touch.

“You accused me of enjoying it, getting off on it.” I raise my hand then bring it down hard against one cheek.

She yelps and tries to scoot forward.

“Anything I want, Arabella. Stay fucking still.” I stroke my palm over the red mark I’ve left. “If I’d been getting off on it, I wouldn’t have spanked you through your panties. I’d have pulled them down, and showed the entire class how wet your pussy was.” I trail my fingertips down her ass and through the slick arousal coating her pussy.

“Just like you are now. I’d have finger-fucked you with one hand, while I spanked you with the other.” I push one finger inside her. “I’d have made the entire class count while I took you to the edge and held you there.” I add a second finger and pump them in and out of her body in a slow, measured movement. “I’d have made you beg to come right there in front of everyone.”

“Eli.” She pushes back against my fingers.

“And then, just as you were hovering on the cusp, at the point of no return, I’d have put Tina on her knees and her tongue on your pussy and let you come all over her face.”

“I don’t like girls.” She gasps when I push a third finger inside her.

“No, but you *loved* me ... and if I’d wanted you to fuck a girl’s face back then, you’d have done it.”

I land another slap, and her pussy clenches around my fingers.

“Count for me, *Princess*.” My palm connects with her ass again.

“One.”

“That’s for turning up here uninvited.” Another slap lands.

“T-two.”

“That’s for thinking you have any say in what happens in my home.”

She whimpers when the third open-palmed slap hits her other ass cheek.

“Th-three. Eli, please stop.”

“That’s for demanding I fuck you.” I pull my fingers free from her pussy and spread her lips apart. My other hand reaches around and pinches her clit before I tap it in a light slap with two fingers.

She hisses.

“Count!”

“Four.” She sobs the word.

“That’s for fucking thinking you were imagining how good the sex was between us.” Wrapping my fingers around my dick, I run the tip over her ass and down to her pussy. “Are

you on birth control?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have any condoms. Red or green?”

“But you said—”

“Answer the fucking question,” I snarl, bringing my palm down against her ass again.

“Green!”

I shove my dick inside her.

“Ohmygod, yes. *Green!*”

CHAPTER 27

ARABELLA

My ass is still throbbing with heat from Eli's spanking as he enters me hard and fast. The roughness is enough to steal my breath away. Pushing back, I take him deeper, smiling through my tears when he moans. It sends a huge surge of possessiveness through me.

As much as Eli might deny it, our craving for each other is mutual. He's always been mine as much as I am his.

His hands move to my waist, forcing me to stillness. "Don't fucking move."

I obey his command. Pulling back, he thrusts into me again, rocking forward, in and out. There's nothing gentle about his movements. It's an animalistic coupling fueled by raw need, just like when we'd fucked in the past.

I curl my finger against the duvet as he rolls his hips.

"Yes! Oh yes, Eli."

"Shut the fuck up. I didn't tell you to speak."

I'm panting and writhing and groaning as his cock plunges into me over and over. I want his savagery. The part of Eli that comes out whenever we've been together like this before.

My Nasty Little Monster. The boy who had taken my heart.

My mind goes fuzzy at the exquisite torture. The rush of

sensation he always evokes in me as I rush along a path toward release. Yet even that isn't enough. I need more. I need *everything* from him.

All of it.

“Stay in that position,” he snaps when I try to move.

I twist my head to look at him over my shoulder. His dark and turbulent gaze meets mine. “I want to see you.”

There's no warmth or love in his expression as he shakes his head. “I don't want to see you. Keep your face in the pillow.”

“Eli—” His name turns into a yelp as his palm cracks down on my ass cheek, leaving it stinging.

“You're my plaything right now. I make the rules, remember?”

“But I want to kiss you and touch you.” The words come out in a whine. “I need you to play with my breasts and my clit.”

“You wanted to be fucked, and that's what I'm giving you.” There's no give in his voice.

“But that's—”

“Exactly what you asked for. You want *closure*, remember, so that's what you're getting. If you don't like it, you know how to stop it.”

His words are icy claws around my heart. “No.”

The look in his eyes burns me right down to my toes. Hands tangling in my hair, he forces my head down and my cheek

against the pillow, and thrusts into me fiercely, his rhythm relentless. I lose all sense of being one with him, my mind disconnecting what's happening now to how it used to be between us. This is nothing but cold and clinical sex.

Punishment for me leaving him?

The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I still can't tell him to stop.

I close my eyes when my orgasm hits. The intoxicating feeling washes over me, and I shatter into a bone-melting climax. Eli pumps into me a few more times before following me over. His cock throbs inside me, and he slumps over my back.

Silence fills the room. The only sound is our harsh labored breathing.

"Fuck." Eli straightens, pulling out of me. I wince at the roughness of his action.

A second later, the bedroom door slams shut.

Alone, numb, and confused, I remain in position, naked, ass in the air, in the dying embers of my release. After a moment, when it finally sinks in that he's not coming back, I roll carefully onto my side, I lie there, still and silent, shivering. My mind replays what just happened in a painstakingly slow reel.

Is this really what I'd wanted? A quick, meaningless fuck?

No, it's not.

Eli did exactly what he threatened. He took what he wanted from my body, with no care for how I felt. I can't even be angry about it. He'd laid it out in clear words, and I'd agreed to it. There had been no cuddling, no affection, no gentle touches. After the hate sex we had in the past, he'd always held me afterward, made me feel desired. He'd never just walked out.

I'm such a fucking idiot.

My stomach is a heavy pit of self-disgust at the realization.

What had I been trying to achieve? To see if some spark between us was still there. To see if Eli still wanted me as much as I want him.

Instead of closure, all I feel is empty, dirty, and used. Eli did what he set out to do. To show me there's nothing left between us—only the ashes of our past.

There's nothing for me here.

Nothing.

Tears well, oozing through my closed lashes to trickle down my cheeks, in humiliation.

I have to get the hell out of here and away from Eli for good.

CHAPTER 28

ELI

Fucking closure.

I pace my bedroom, raking my hands through my hair.

Fucking touch her and hold her? What the actual fuck did she think she was asking me to do?

I spin, burying my fist into the wall next to Kellan's painting.

"And you can shut the fuck up," I snap.

He doesn't reply, just laughs down at me.

"You're not fucking helping."

Striding across the room, I stare out of the window.

I don't think I can do this anymore. How am I supposed to face her after what I just did?

Fucking closure ... fuck that shit.

I throw open the bedroom window and climb out to drop into the snow beyond. The wind that whipped up during the thundersnow storm overnight has dislodged a lot of the snow drifts, and I wade my way across to the storage shed where I keep shovels, axes, and everything else I need for forest living. It takes me a few minutes of messing around to get the doors to the shed open, but once I'm inside, I find a snow shovel and get to work digging a path out from the front door of the cabin.

My anger and self-loathing over what I'd just let Arabella goad me into doing, keeping me warm.

I'm not sure how long passes, but the sun has moved to behind the cabin when I finally have the area cleared enough to pull out my Land Rover Defender and make sure the snow chains are secure on the wheels. Hopping in, I drive down the manmade road slowly, checking how safe it is. When the car doesn't slip or slide, I make the judgment call that it's good enough and reverse back to the cabin.

Leaving the engine running, I walk indoors and down the hallway. I don't bother knocking on the guestroom door, just twist the handle and throw it open. The door bounces off the wall as I step through. Arabella sits up.

"Get your shit packed. You have five minutes," I tell her, and walk out without waiting for a reply.

I tell my cell to start a five-minute countdown and prop it on the dash of the car, while I wait for her. She arrives just as the voice informs me there are thirty-two seconds remaining. I shut it off when she throws open the door, and goes back and forth for her cases, tossing each one in the back, and then climbs in beside me.

I don't say a word, don't even look in her direction, just stab the play button on my music and let Black Sabbath's 'Paranoid' fill the interior, and drive away. I can't risk driving at speed along the road. There could be icy patches, and I don't want to end up off the road and stuck with her for a

moment longer than necessary. The drive to the closest town, on a normal day, takes around forty minutes. Today, I'm pretty sure it takes over an hour, but eventually we pull into the small town. I drive along the only road and pull up outside the small bed and breakfast.

Climbing out, I reach into the back for her suitcases and dump them on the sidewalk, then return to the driver's side of the car. Arabella glances at me, chewing on her bottom lip, and I look away, hands gripping the steering wheel.

The slamming of the car door tells me she's finally got out, and I slam my foot onto the gas, wheels spitting up dirt and snow as I tear off down the road.

The sun is setting by the time I get back to the cabin. I put the car away, make sure everywhere is secure, then walk inside. Silence greets me. I can *feel* the emptiness. Something I've never noticed before. Walking across the room, I flick the switch for the underfloor heating, turning it off. It's not necessary now I'm alone again. The wood fire will be enough. I spend some time lighting it, then go into the kitchen to make food.

I don't look at what container I grab, just give a quick glance to the color-coded instructions on the lid before I toss it into the microwave and leave it to cook while I take a shower. My footsteps slow as I pass the guest room, and I'm opening the door and looking inside before I can talk myself out of it.

The room beyond is neat, the bed made, and curtains drawn.

There's nothing to show that Arabella was ever here, apart from the faintest trace of her scent in the air. I move deeper into the room and find my sweats folded up and placed on top of the dresser. My throat tightens, and I close my eyes, battling against the urge to shout out loud.

I told you once you had a taste of her, you wouldn't be able to let her go again. So, now what are you going to do about it?

It's a good question, and one I need to think about. Because one thing is sure, what happened between us this morning wasn't closure.

Far from it.

It was the *opposite* of closure.

It was a door opening and, like I told her when she forced the issue, we would be done when I said we were done.

And right now, I know one thing for certain.

We're not fucking done.

CHAPTER 29

ARABELLA

The chilly winter wind nips at my cheeks and nose as I watch Eli drive away. Blinking faster to stop the tears burning at the back of my eyes, I huff out a breath. He ignored me the whole journey, which made it clear how unwanted I was. I wish I'd never come out to the fucking cabin in the first place. My mom should have found someone else to come and check on him instead. The whole thing has been one big mistake.

I need to move forward. Forget what happened. Dwelling on it will do no good. At least I know where I stand with Eli. I got the closure I wanted. The knowledge doesn't make me as happy as I thought it would.

I don't enter the bed and breakfast that he dumps me outside. Instead, I trudge, juggling all my bags, to the little café down the street. I order myself a coffee and find an empty table by the window. The tension holding me upright finally collapses, and I sink onto the seat. All I want to do is curl up into a ball and hide in shame and embarrassment, but that's not possible right now.

I'm not ready to face the truth. I tried to seduce Eli, and it had ended in nothing but tears.

I strip out of my coat but keep my hat on and my scarf coiled around my neck. Even though the air is laced with tempting scents, the thought of food makes my stomach churn.

I need to get back to L.A. Back to my life. Opening the app on my cell, I tap around, and I have an Uber on the way a minute later.

In an attempt to keep my thoughts away from Eli, the last few days and the painful memories it's left, I check the dozen messages waiting for me.

Miles: How's it going with Eli?

Miles: Merry Christmas, bestie! I wish you'd stayed in New York with us. I miss your face. Yes, I'm drunk. Eli doesn't deserve you looking after him. You're a great friend, and I love you!

Miles: Bella, are you ok?

Miles: Why aren't you responding??

Miles: Ivan just told me about a storm heading your way. Maybe you should come back to New York.

Miles: I tried calling, but it went straight to voicemail.

Miles: I'm freaking out a little that I haven't heard from you for so long.

Miles: WHERE ARE YOU?

I smile sadly. The longest we've gone without some form of contact is twenty-four hours. The thought of Ivan dealing with an anxious Miles sends a pang of guilt through my chest.

Mom: Merry Christmas to you and Eli. Let me know how he's doing when you can.

Mom: It's been a while since I've heard anything. Are you kids ok?

Mom: Both your phones are going to voicemail. What's happening?

I sip my coffee and listen to my voice messages next.

"Hi, sweetheart. How are you and Eli? I saw that there was a snowstorm out there, and I hope you're both being safe and careful. I'll try calling again in a few days."

"It's Mom again, I still can't get through. Are you both okay? Talk to you soon."

I can't bring myself to call her back at the moment. Maybe tomorrow when I've had time to process events. I move to the next voice message.

"Hey, it's me." Miles' voice is tight, barely masking his concern. "Yes, I'm checking up on you. I haven't heard from you in days, and I'm worried a bear might have eaten you. Ivan assures me they are all hibernating, but I've seen plenty of horror movies. Text me when you can."

"It's me again. Do I need to fly over there and dig you out from under all that snow? Please, don't give me a heart attack. *Call me.*"

I shoot off a text to ease his concern.

Me: I'm alive and heading home.

I'm draining the dregs of my coffee when my phone rings. I force myself to answer it when I check the caller ID, knowing he won't give up if I don't reply.

"Hi."

"Oh, thank god! Do you know how worried I've been about you?" Miles' voice is like a soothing balm to my soul.

"I just received all your texts and the voice messages. We got snowed in and lost cell reception," I tell him. "Neither of us could contact the outside world."

"That sounds positively terrifying. How was Eli?"

"Sick for a few days."

"You sound strange."

"I'm fine."

"How long have I known you? I know when you're lying. Did something happen between you and Eli? Oh my god, it did, didn't it?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Where are you?" The worry is back in his tone.

My attention moves to the window and the snowy street beyond. "Waiting in a café for an Uber to take me to the airport. I don't have a ticket, but I'll just get whatever I can back to L.A."

Can he hear my desperation to leave?

"Come to New York. We are still at the hotel. He's been

busy with the other art gallery he has here.”

My chest squeezes in pain. “Miles—”

“We have a few more days in the city.” He keeps talking, before I can make an excuse. “We can head back to L.A. altogether. I promise, I won’t interrogate you over what happened.”

I rest my forehead against the cold glass of the window and close my eyes tightly. “You promise?”

“You have my word. Unless you want to tell me. You just don’t sound like you should be alone right now.”

My lips curve in a small smile. “Thank you.”

“No need for thanks. That’s what best friends do. Just tell me what you need.”

“A drink,” I reply honestly, throat thick with the raw emotion swirling within me. “A bottle of wine.”

“That can be arranged.” Ivan’s voice rumbles. “Come to us, we’ll look after you.”

Has Miles had it on speakerphone the whole time?

A car pulls up outside the café. “My Uber is here. I have to go. I’ll let you know when I reach New York.”

I end the call, and wave at the driver through the window.

The need to escape further than the town spurs me into movement.

Away from the cabin.

As far from Eli as I can get.

CHAPTER 30

ELI

I receive a text from Elena the second I turn off airplane mode. It informs me that she's arranged a driver to pick me up from the airport and take me to my favorite penthouse suite at the Royal Crown Plaza hotel, where she'll meet me at six pm *sharp* to go to the gallery.

Sure enough, there's a driver waiting for me when I exit the airport. My name is neatly printed on the board he's holding. I pay a porter to stash my suitcase in the back of the car and slip onto the back seat. I'm traveling light as my intention is to drive down to the house in the Hamptons for a week once I've showed my face at the art show.

I tip my head against the seat and close my eyes. The last two weeks have been a shitshow. I managed to finish the final painting with a few hours to spare before it was all collected and shipped to the gallery ready for the show tonight. I've barely slept, barely eaten, and given a choice, I wouldn't even be here today. Between my agent and Elena, they hounded and hassled me until I got on the plane.

"Mr. Travers?"

My eyes snap open at the sound of my name to find the driver twisted in his seat, looking at me.

"We're here, sir."

I blink and look out of the window. “Oh ... right. Thanks.” I pluck a couple of folded bills out of my pocket and hand them to him, throw open the door and climb out.

A hotel porter materializes at the back of the car and takes out my case.

“Your suite is ready for you, Mr. Travers,” he says as he trots along beside me into the hotel. “The key is waiting at reception.”

“Thanks.”

Check-in goes smoothly, and I’m in the elevator and heading up to the penthouse suite soon after. The elevator doors open smoothly onto the interior of the penthouse. The key activates the floor, so there are no concerns of anyone else coming up here accidentally, unless I leave permission down at the desk for someone to let them up. It’s one of the reasons I like this hotel.

Pulling off my jacket, I drop it on the back of the couch as I move through the room and throw open the doors leading out to the private balcony area. As I walk through, I catch sight of my reflection and stop to look.

“Because you’re not a sad and pathetic hermit living in a cabin in the woods, right? God knows what the locals think. Crazy Mr. Travers, the artist who looks like some kind of freaking wild eyed lumberjack who wanders around talking to himself.”

The female voice rings out and I spin, looking for its owner

before catching myself. There's no one here but me.

“Well, don't you look handsome.” Elena presses her hands to my chest and rises on her toes to press a kiss to my cheek, when I come out of the bedroom. “That tie, though.” She rolls her eyes and smooths her palm over it before fiddling with the knot. “There. Much better.”

“Thanks, *Mom*.”

She laughs. “I wasn't sure if you'd try and cancel again.”

“I'm here, aren't I?”

She pats my cheek. “Yes, you are. Shall we go?” She loops her arm through mine and draws me to the elevator.

“I just need to get my jacket.” I pull away, pick up the black suit jacket and slip it on. “*Now* I'm ready.”

We travel down in the elevator in a companionable silence. We became friends years ago, after Arabella left, and then grew closer still when my dad fell ill. I'd discovered a side to Elena that not many people were aware of. She thrived as my father's wife, combatted an alcohol addiction, and became quite a well-known name in the Hamptons for her natural interior design skills which grew over time to become her own small business.

A car pulls up when we step out of the hotel and I hold open the door for Elena to climb in before settling beside her.

“When was the last time you attended one of your own

shows?”

“I don’t remember. A year or two. I don’t need to be there.”

“But the rumor of the artist being there builds excitement.”

“And that’s why no one knows it’s me. All they’d do is ask me who the muse is for the Hellcat series, and whether I can introduce them.”

“I don’t know whether to be proud of you for that series or mortified over it.”

One side of my mouth tips up. “It’s not like you didn’t know what we were doing.”

“Knowing and seeing are two very different things, Eli. I would prefer to think my eighteen-year-old daughter was not indulging in those kinds of activities with her stepbrother.”

“It’s not like we grew up together. I’ve never viewed her like a sister.”

“I should hope not.” She turns to face me. “Which reminds me, what happened between the two of you over Christmas?”

I keep my expression clear. “Nothing, why?”

“She’s in New York visiting but refused to come tonight. I didn’t see her over Christmas or New Year, so she promised to come with me to a charity event tomorrow evening.”

My heart lurches.

Arabella is in New York?

“She wanted closure, so we ... hashed out a few things

while we were snowed in. I'm sure she's happily getting on with her life again, now."

Elena frowns but doesn't say anything further because the car pulls up outside the gallery to let us out.

The best part about being an almost-anonymous artist is I can wander around shows where my work is displayed and be ignored. I left Elena with a group of her friends an hour ago and have been hiding out in the private gallery—just me and a glass of bourbon, sitting on a bench in front of a sculpture of Ari. I finished this one two days after throwing her out of my cabin.

It's based on one of the first times we'd played. She's sitting on a bench, holding her bra against her chest, blindfold in place. Her head is tilted as she listens for someone coming close, and a half-smile teases her lips.

"You use that girl a lot." A deep voice breaks the silence and I glance behind me to find a tall, tattooed male with dark hair and gray eyes standing at my left. A lavender haired beauty is beside him.

"Gabe." I set down my glass and stand, holding out my hand.

The tattooed lead singer of Forgotten Legacy takes it, grinning, and shakes. "This is Harper, my fiancée."

"A pleasure."

She smiles at me. “Gabe just bought me one of your wolf pieces from the other room.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank her, I only bought it so I could guilt you into doing something for me.”

I laugh and return my attention to the rock star. “And what’s that?”

“We have a charity auction tomorrow night.”

“For your foundation?”

“That’s right. I wanted to ask if you’ll donate something. Your art is always hunted down for big money. I want some of it. The money, that is. Not your art. I have enough of that.”

“Oh? For what?”

“We need to fund buying some more land, building another home, and furnishing it. Your stepmom has donated her design skills to the interior, so we just need to raise the money to pay for the land and the building of it.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Great.” He turns to leave, then stops. “Oh ... one other thing. I want you to be there.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “Bigger draw. If they hear the artist is there, more people will show up. More people mean more bids, and *that*, my friend, means more money.” He grins at me.

“You know I won’t give up my anonymity.”

He shrugs. “Not asking you to. I just want them all looking around and trying to guess who you are.”

“So, purely for your own entertainment?”

His grin is wicked. “I’ve got to get something out of it.”

I laugh, but my brain is ticking, sorting through comments made by Elena. “Is Elena going to be there tomorrow?”

“Yeah, along with her daughter, I think.”

Anticipation licks along my veins. “Send me the details. I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER 31

ARABELLA

The crowd around me is buzzing with excitement. Ivan's gallery is hosting the charity auction for the Mercer-Jackson Foundation for Abused Children tonight, headed by Gabe Mercer, lead singer of Forgotten Legacy. I've caught a couple of the band's songs on the radio, and I know Miles is a huge fan. When Mom said she was attending the event to fundraise for a house for abused children, and invited me to join her, I hadn't been able to decline.

No, just the one for Eli's exhibition.

The knowledge that Eli was in New York yesterday left me unsettled. From what my mom told me, when he does attend those events, he rarely sticks around.

I'm sure he will be back at the cabin by now. There's no need to worry about running into him. I'm not even sure what I would do if I did see him again. Pretend our last time together hadn't happened? Smile politely? Ignore him?

Scratch his fucking eyes out and demand a do-over?

Swallowing down my misery, my gaze roams over the smiling people in front of me and lock on Miles weaving through the crowd with a glass of champagne. He's following behind a dark-haired man I recognize as Forgotten Legacy's singer, and a lavender-haired woman. Eyes wide with excitement, my best friend mouths, 'oh my god' at me.

I paste a smile onto my lips and roll my eyes at him.

Miles and Ivan had taken me under their wing when I returned to New York two weeks ago. I'd been an emotional mess. As promised, Miles had a bottle of expensive wine waiting for me, and they'd taken care of me while I got drunk. I remember very little of that evening or what I said to them. What I *do* recall is the mother of all hangovers I had the next morning.

Miles finally gives up chasing the gorgeous rockstar and heads over to join me. "Gabe Mercer *and* Draven Moore are here. Pinch me. I think I died and went to heaven."

"Who?" I tease.

"Don't even pretend you don't know who Gabe Mercer is!" He waggles a finger at me. "Draven Moore is the drummer of Climax Seclusion. They're friends."

I glance around the sea of faces. "Which one is he?"

"The big muscly one with the neck tattoos. I'd climb him like a mountain any day."

My attention settles on the hulking man with intense blue eyes and the tiny blonde woman hanging off his arm. "Don't let Ivan hear you say that, or you'll make him jealous."

Miles' gaze sweeps around. "Where's Elena?"

"She's gone to use the restroom."

He bumps his shoulder gently against mine. "I'm glad she talked you into coming tonight."

“Me too.”

Although *Monsieur* Allaire had not been happy with me taking more time off from the fashion house. Not that I give a shit. In the four years I’ve been working there, I’ve barely taken any time off at all.

“I better go and find Ivan.”

“You don’t want him to think you’re misbehaving.”

Miles drapes an arm over my shoulder. “You know I’m always getting into some kind of trouble.”

Laughing, I press an affectionate kiss on his cheek. “Go on.”

“I’m going. I’m going.” He grins and walks away through the throng.

The smile drops from my lips, and I turn to study the pieces of artwork on display that are up for auction tonight. My mother mentioned a few well-known artists had donated paintings, and it sparked my interest.

I appraise each picture, moving slowly along them, until I stop in front of one that hooks my focus.

It’s of a naked blonde woman asleep on a gothic-looking four-poster bed, blood-red drapes hanging from the frame. The floor beneath it is a carpet of white ethereal flowers, and pale moonlight floods through the window. A monster with twisted horns is lurking in the shadows. His grotesque face is turned longingly toward the sleeping figure.

The name tag beneath the artwork reads ‘Stolen Moment’.

“Sorry, sweetheart, I ran into a friend on the way back from the restroom, and it took me a while to extricate myself.”

I don't turn at my mother's voice but continue staring at the female figure in the painting.

“Are you going to bid on anything tonight?”

“It's for a good cause, so I might. What do you think of this one?” She gestures at the piece that has caught my attention.

My gaze moves over the detail woven into the story. “It's very dark.”

“Do you like it?”

I reach for the padlock pendant around my neck only to remember I never put it back on after my trip to the cabin. It's tucked away in a drawer back in my apartment at home. “It calls to me on a certain level. A channel for my inner darkness. I can see the melancholy. The yearning. It's beautiful in its sadness.”

My mother laughs. “When did you become such an art critic?”

I shrug. “I like to go and see the pieces Ivan displays at his gallery in L.A.”

Our attention returns to the creation in front of us. “So, you'd buy this and put it on the wall in your apartment?”

“There's something haunting about it. I like it.”

“Maybe in your bedroom facing the bed so you can look at

it when you're touching yourself late at night.”

I stiffen at the familiar silky male whisper right in my ear.

I spin around and find Eli right behind me. His appearance catches me off guard, freezing me in place. I take in the black suit hugging his muscled form, the black shirt, and matching tie. He's shaved since I saw him last. His beard is now cut back to a stubbled, sharp jaw. Long hair brushed and tidy, he looks every inch the millionaire he is, and not the mountain man from a few weeks ago. There's an air of sophistication about him now, edged with a hint of danger.

There's no surprise in his expression as he looks at me, his dark lashes sweeping down as he studies the demure black dress and heels I'm wearing.

“Eli!” Elena's face lights up with delight.

My eyes dart between him and my mother. “What are *you* doing here?”

Eli nods to the canvas I've just been studying. “I donated some artwork for the charity auction, and Gabe invited me to attend.”

Of course, it's one of his.

I groan silently, hating myself for not realizing sooner. “I should have recognized your work.”

One side of his mouth tips up. “You should have recognized yourself.”

I'm left gaping while my mother threads her arm through

his. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Eli smiles down at her, but his sardonic gaze is locked on me. “I wanted to surprise you.”

Has he come to torment me more?

CHAPTER 32

ELI

I pluck two champagne glasses from one of the roving servers' trays. Handing one to Elena, I turn to Arabella.

“Champagne, *Princess?*”

Blue eyes spitting fire, she snatches it out of my hand and drains it in one go. My lips twitch.

“Thirsty?” I lift a hand and another server stops beside me. I take two more glasses and place her now empty one on the tray. This time I keep one for myself and hand her the second.

“Bella!” Elena murmurs softly, frowning at her daughter. “Are you alright?”

“Fine.” She takes a more sedate sip from her new glass. “I was just *really* thirsty.”

“Maybe you're coming down ...” I pause to smile at her “... with something. You were *really thirsty* at the cabin, as well.”

She chokes on her second sip of champagne. I move closer and rest my palm against her back. “Who knew champagne posed such a choking risk.”

She glares up at me but before she can speak, another voice intrudes.

“Eli, glad you made it.”

I drop my hand and turn smoothly to greet Gabe Mercer.

“It looks like you got a good turnout.”

He nods. “Better than I expected if I’m being honest. The auction starts in thirty minutes. Ivan says that should be enough time for everyone to look around and see what they want to bid on.” His eyes shift to Elena. “Good to see you, Elena. Is this your daughter?”

“Gabe.” Elena nods. “Can I introduce you to Arabella?”

“Arabella.” He repeats her name, frowning briefly, then he smiles. “Wait. *You’re* the one Ivan told me about.”

Her eyes widen. “I ... am?”

“The stained glass work. He was showing me photographs earlier. I’d like to arrange a meeting when we’re both back in L.A. The band would love to do a photoshoot surrounded by some of your work. It’ll go perfectly with the theme of our next album.”

Her lips part. “You ... would?”

Gabe nods. “Ivan has my contact details. Get him to call Candice, my assistant, when you know some dates when you’ll be free.” He glances over his shoulder when someone calls his name. “Fuck, they’ve found me. I better go and play nice.” He turns to me. “Thanks again, Eli. Call me.” And then he’s gone, weaving his way through the milling throng of people.

Arabella stares after him, eyes full of wonder. Gabe *fucking* Mercer—charming girls even when he isn’t trying.

I snap my fingers in front of her face until she blinks and refocuses on me.

“What?”

“He’s taken.”

She frowns. “I’m not interested in him.”

“Then roll your tongue back into your mouth and wipe away the drool.”

“What’s wrong, Eli? Jealous?”

“Of him?” I snort and shake my head.

Of fucking anyone you look at with anything but the hatred I see in your eyes when you look at me.

“Children!” Elena snaps the word. “Play nice!”

At the word *play*, my eyes lift and catch Arabella’s. A smile tips my lips up.

“What do you say, Princess?” My voice is soft. “Do you want to play ... nice?”

“I do not want to play. *Nice* or otherwise.” Her words are delivered in a haughty tone, and she turns away. “I’m going to look at the rest of the art. I’ll join you when the auction starts.” She presses a kiss to her mom’s cheek and walks away.

I watch her go.

“It never changes with you two.” Elena’s voice drags my attention away from Arabella’s ass, and I turn my head to look at her mom. “Always bickering. It worries me that you’ll

never be able to get along. One day I'd love to actually be able to spend time with you both in the same room."

"I'd worry more if we weren't bickering." I pull my cell out of my jacket pocket. "Do you have her number? I forgot to get it while we were in the cabin." I hand her my cell and she types it in. "Thanks."

"Do *not* abuse it, Eli."

I affect an innocent expression. "Would I?"

She snorts a laugh. "Yes, you would. Look, Clara Davies is over there. I need to speak to her." She pats my arm. "Behave yourself."

"Yes, *Mom*."

The moment she's out of my orbit, I look around for Arabella. I can't see her, so I unlock my phone and tap through to messages.

Me: Red or green?

The response is instant.

Arabella: No.

Me: Coward.

Arabella: You're an asshole, and I'm done.

Me: Bullshit. You never even came close to getting closure. Anyway, we're not done. The agreement was we were done when

I said we were done. And I never said it.

Arabella: You threw me out and drove away. That was you telling me you were done.

Me: We're not done. Red or green.

Arabella: Fuck you.

Me: If you play the game, that will definitely be on the cards.

Arabella: No. We're done. Over. Finished. Closure was had.

Me: Like fuck it was.

I make my way through the crowd of people admiring the artwork until I spot her blonde hair. Moving up behind her, I slip an arm around her waist and pull her back against me. She stiffens. I lower my head until my lips are close to her ear.

“What if I promise to make you come until you can't walk?”

“No.” But her tongue snakes out to wet her lips.

“I'll eat your pussy. That's what you wanted, isn't it? My hands on your tits, my tongue on your clit?”

“Go away, Eli.”

“Red or green, Kitten?” I lick the shell of her ear and slide my hand up over her stomach until I can cup her breast. I can feel her nipple pressing through the material. “You know you like my games. Play with me.”

“No.”

I squeeze her breast then let my hand drop. “Shame. Alright. Your choice, of course.” I turn away and walk across to the opposite side of the room.

Me: But if you change your mind. Take off your panties and bring them to me. I’ll be waiting.

CHAPTER 33

ARABELLA

Eli is insane.

The colors of the painting blur before my eyes. I can still feel the echo of his hand on my breast, scorching me through the material of my dress. The way he touched me, confident that I wouldn't stop him, where anyone could see us, has left me shocked, breathless and confused.

The agreement was we were done when I said we were done. And I never said it.

My emotions are reeling.

I don't understand the change in him. He was angry and bitter at the cabin. He couldn't get rid of me fast enough. *Now* he's trying to seduce me with text messages and dirty words.

Why does he want to play?

I am not going to be sucked back into Eli's world.

No. Way. In. Hell.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" I blink.

My best friend frowns. "Your cheeks are flushed. Was that Eli I saw?"

"I ... yes." I lick my lips and tighten my grip on the flute of champagne in my hand. "*Apparently*, he's friends with Gabe

Mercer and donated one of the art pieces here tonight.”

“I didn’t know he was going to be here,” Ivan tells the man at his side, tone defensive.

Miles glares at him.

“But he’s left a sparkle in Arabella’s eyes.”

I scowl at the Russian. “The last thing I would ever do is *sparkle* around Eli Travers.”

“Do you want me to take you back to your hotel?” Miles asks.

I shake my head. “No. I’m not going to let his presence ruin my evening.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Completely.” My response is clipped and final.

“The auction starts soon,” Ivan wraps an arm around his fiancé’s shoulders, excitement etched over his face. “I’m impressed with the turnout we’ve had. The place is packed, and the media has been all over the event.”

I take a sip of champagne and force myself to relax. “Gabe Mercer mentioned wanting a photoshoot with my stained glass and said you had something to do with it, Ivan.”

He shrugs. “You’ll be taking commissions in no time for your work.”

“I told you it was a hobby. Nothing more.”

“You shouldn’t hide them away, Bella. Talent like yours

should be seen and admired.”

“And Ivan has decided it’s going to happen,” Miles rolls his eyes. “You might as well give in now. He won’t stop until your art is in his gallery.”

Ivan smiles. “We need to check on some last-minute details. Come, *Luchik*. I want to keep you close, so delicious rock stars don’t tempt you away from me.”

I take another gulp of my drink, and search through the crowd. Eli is standing alone at a table. The second our gazes collide, heat sizzles down the connection.

Eli smirks.

I glare at him.

Phone in one hand, he types something. A beat later, my cell vibrates.

Who the fuck gave him my number?

I’m tempted to ignore it, but inquisitiveness wins.

Unknown number: I’m waiting for those panties, Kitten.

I narrow my eyes and respond.

Me: I told you to fuck off.

Unknown number: Don’t tell me you’re not wet at the idea of giving them to me in a room full of people.

Me: I don’t know what you think is

happening here, Eli, but I'm not doing this with you.

Unknown number: Don't you want me to touch you the way you begged me back at the cabin?

Me: Why should I even trust you?

Unknown number: Because, unlike your other lovers, I know exactly what gets you hot. I also know you're curious.

What if I promise to make you come until you can't walk? I'll eat your pussy. That's what you wanted, isn't it? My mouth on your tits, my tongue on your clit?

Is he serious, or is this bullshit to punish me a little more for what happened between us in the cabin?

I shift restlessly, the traitorous thrum of arousal humming through my blood. I'm wet from just his texts, every inch of me is prickling with awareness at his presence.

There's a knowing look on his face when I look back up at him. He knows exactly what he's doing to me because he's done it before. The memories of when we'd played together in the dark ten years ago are still the ones that get me off.

Is he screwing with my head?

A flare of panic hits me out of nowhere and I whirl away in the opposite direction, only to smash into a wall of muscle. The champagne left in my glass douses the front of my dress

as I stumble back. Before I can fall, a strong arm wraps around my waist, preventing me from landing on my ass.

I cringe, the sticky wetness soaking through the material against my breasts. “I’m so sorry.”

The arm around me drops away. “Are you okay?” The deep rumbling voice is attached to the famous drummer Miles pointed out to me earlier, Draven Moore.

“Yes, just glad I wore a black dress tonight.” My laugh is high and nervous.

His lips curve, and he produces a tissue from one pocket. “It’s clean.”

I smile back at him and accept it, then look down at the damp spot on my chest. “I should go and sponge this. I’m not sure a tissue will be enough.” I dab at the wet spot.

“Let me pay for the dry cleaning.”

I shake my head. “No but thank you. It was my fault. I should have looked where I was going.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely. Please, don’t worry.”

The small blonde he’d been with earlier joins him. I say my goodbyes and slip through the crowd, and into the nearest ladies’ restroom.

I clean up the front of my dress as best I can. Thankfully my dress is black, and the hand-dryer makes quick work of the

wet patch. Once I'm done, I start back for the door, only to stop.

I'm waiting for those panties, Kitten.

The restroom is empty, other than me. My heart is hammering against my ribs when I step into one of the stalls, slide the lock into place and press my back against the door.

What am I doing?

I take in a deep breath and close my eyes.

You never even came close to getting closure.

He's right. I didn't. But do I want to risk getting hurt because he's decided he wants to resurrect our old game?

Is the pleasure he's dangling in front of me worth it?

Should I accept his dare one final time or walk away for good?

CHAPTER 34

ELI

“Eli.” The voice saying my name is not wholly unexpected, and I turn slowly to face a man who I’d last seen ten years ago, when he turned up at my home to help Arabella pack and leave.

I let my gaze run over him. He looks good, *better* than he had the last time we were this close to each other. Which is no surprise given I’d lost my best friend and he’d lost his first real love.

It takes me a second to realize he’s holding out a hand. I take it in mine, and we shake. To anyone watching, it must look like we’re strangers. Which, really, we are. We’d never had a chance to become friends, I’m not sure if we ever would have.

“You look well,” Miles says when he releases my hand.

“So do you. What are you doing these days? Still swimming?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Only for exercise. I’ve tried a few different things, but haven’t really found something I’m passionate about, so for now, I’m just living life and spending my inheritance.”

“I hear you’re engaged to the man behind *Iskusstvo*.” I name the art gallery Ivan Vasiliev owns. “Never thought you’d end

up with someone in the art business.”

He chuckles. “I didn’t know who he was until I introduced him to Bella. We met in his gallery, but I thought he just worked there. I’m surprised to see you here. She said you live out at the cabin.”

“I was in town for a show last night, and Gabe invited me to attend while I was here ... and talked me out of some pieces so he can sell them.”

“You *know* Gabe Mercer?”

“We met a few years ago.” I glance over at the man in question, who has his arm wrapped around his fiancée’s waist as they chat with a group of businessmen. “I did the artwork for one of Forgotten Legacy’s album covers and the band insisted on meeting me. We hit it off and kept in touch.”

I feel the vibration of my cell in my pocket, telling me I have a message. “Excuse me for a second. I need to check this.” Pulling it out, I swipe open the notification.

Arabella: Why?

Me: Why what?

Arabella: You know what. You fucked me like you really hated me!

My lips twitch.

Me: Isn’t that what you asked me to do?

Three dots pop up, disappear, pop up again, then disappear. I

slip my cell back into my pocket.

“Sorry about that. So how are you? This is Ivan’s gallery, right?”

“I’m good. Yeah, it is. He’d ... uhhh ...” His hand lifts to rub the back of his neck and a slight hint of pink stains his cheeks. “He wants to meet you. He hosted one of your shows last year and hoped you’d go to it, but—”

“I don’t often go to them. It wasn’t anything personal.”

“I know. That’s what I told him, but ...” he shrugs.

“But he figured out you know me and begged for a favor?”

He nods.

“It’s okay. I’m supposed to be driving to the Hamptons tomorrow, but I could delay it an extra day. How about we have dinner tomorrow night?” I take out my cell, check there are no messages, then navigate to the address book. “Give me your number and we’ll work something out.” I hand him my cell and he types into it before passing it back to me.

I send him a quick text. “There. Now you have my number. If tomorrow isn’t good for you, let me know. I’m staying at the Royal Crown Plaza. We could always meet for dinner there.”

“That sounds good.” He hesitates, then reaches out to pat my shoulder, a little awkwardly. “I’d really like to catch up properly. I love Ivan, but ...”

“He doesn’t understand.” I nod. “What about Ari?”

His lips compress. “She won’t even talk about it. And sometimes I just ... I need to talk about him, you know?”

“I know.” My voice is soft. “We’ll catch up, I promise.”

His eyes shift beyond me, and I turn to follow the direction of his gaze. Arabella is moving toward us, her attention pinned to me, a small frown knitting her brows together.

“Looks like you’re in trouble,” Miles murmurs.

I laugh quietly. “When aren’t I?”

“Don’t hurt her, Eli.”

I glance at the man beside me. “I can’t make any promises. Hurting each other seems to be what we do best.”

“Then leave her alone.”

My attention returns to Arabella and stays there. “I can’t do that either.”

Miles sighs. “I don’t understand you two. Kellan always said you were two halves of the same coin. But I don’t see it. She’s nothing like you. She’s sweet and you’re—”

“A monster,” I finish for him. “But sometimes even monsters need a little sweetness in their lives. And some nice girls have a darker side that needs feeding.” My head tilts and I smile down at the woman who comes to a stop in front of us both. “Hello, Hellcat. Do you have something for me?”

She turns to Miles. “Ivan is looking for you.”

“And that’s my cue to leave.” He kisses Arabella’s cheek,

pats my shoulder once more and takes off, leaving us alone.

She stares at me. I stare right back.

“Tell me the truth. Look me in the eyes and tell me the *truth*, Eli.” Her voice is low and firm.

“About what?”

“You treated me like I was nothing more than an object to be used.”

My eyes track over her face, taking in the set of her jaw, the steel in her eyes. The way I answer her question will dictate what happens from here. She’s demanding the truth, but I’m not sure it’s something she’ll be happy hearing.

“I treated you the way you wanted me to.”

“How? *How* could something so cold, so ... so impersonal be something I wanted from you?”

“You said you wanted closure. You wanted to be able to move on. You wanted to prove that what happened between us was down to teenage hormones and heat of the moment. You didn’t want me to show you that the fire was still there, that teenage hormones had fuck all to do with what burns between us. You wanted *closure*. If I’d given you anything else ...” My lips twist into a parody of a smile. “If I’d *made love* to you, you’d be just as angry with me. You’d accuse me of toying with your emotions, of trying to play you.” I reach out and stroke a finger over her lips. “I gave you what *you* demanded from me. I fucked you like I hated you.”

“You know that isn’t what it means!” Her whisper is full of fury. “I *hate* you, Eli. Hate you for how you made me feel!”

“That’s okay. I hate me, too.” It’s not the first time I’ve said that to her. I’d uttered those same words the night we first had sex, when I discovered she was a virgin. When I realized I was head over heels in love with her.

She stares at me, blue eyes intent, and whatever she sees on my face makes her give one small, sharp nod. She reaches out and takes my hand.

“Green.” She presses something into my palm and curls my fingers around it, then takes a step back. “Just for tonight. *Green.*”

I slowly lower my gaze to my hand and loosen my fingers on the material she’s placed there. Black, barely a handful of lace and silk, her panties are a scrunched-up ball in my palm. A smile tugs my lips up and I lift my hand to the breast pocket of my jacket and push the panties into it, then arrange them so they look like a handkerchief. Her cheeks turn pink.

“What are you *doing*? Put them away!”

I press two fingers beneath her chin and tip her head up. My thumb brushes over her bottom lip, pulling it free from her teeth. “The auction is about to start. You should go and find Elena.” I press a chaste kiss to her cheek and walk away.

CHAPTER 35

ARABELLA

Eli strides past me, leaving me even more confused. He hates me, but he wants to toy with me. After everything we've been through, I should have learned my lesson by now. Yet something keeps me going back. I'm a moth to his flame. The danger is addictive, the adrenaline a sweet rush I can't resist.

It will lead to me getting burned so badly that I'll end up in cinders.

I can't let it slide into an obsession like last time. I'm not the same young girl starving for affection and alone in the world. The monster in the dark isn't for keeps this time.

Eli has one night to play his game, and I have two days left with my mother before I head back to L.A. There's no danger of me running into him there. We're worlds apart. I'll see what he plans to do this evening and enjoy the moment *if* he follows through with everything he's promised. My traitorous insides melt with anticipation. If he doesn't, I can always say red and walk away.

I go in search of my mother before the auction starts. My dress isn't short enough for anyone to know I'm not wearing any underwear, but it still feels uncomfortable wandering around without my panties. I try to ignore the cool air brushing between my legs with every step I take.

I catch up to Elena as she's moving away from a couple. As

soon as she sees me, she smiles.

“Where’s Eli?”

“I don’t know. He told me to find you.”

Disappointment ripples across her expression. “I hope he isn’t going to hurry away after the event. It would be nice to see more of him.”

I follow her to where the rest of the guests are sitting in front of a stage.

“I’m sure he’ll hang around for a while.”

“I do hope so.”

When Ivan steps up onto the stage, everyone falls silent, all eyes turn to the man holding the microphone.

“Thank you for joining us this evening.” Ivan says. “The foundation we are here to support tonight does amazing work, and every cent you donate will go toward new land and buildings for the children who need it.”

My mother leans into me. “Oh look, there he is.”

At her whisper, my gaze shifts to the side of the stage where Eli stands beside Gabe Mercer. He catches me looking and raises his hand to gently stroke a finger along the lace of my panties. Gabe notices and whispers in Eli’s ear, then laughs at whatever he says.

Eli smiles, not taking his eyes off me.

My cheeks flush with warmth, and I lower my gaze.

Does he get off on knowing I'm not wearing any panties? Does it make him feel in control? What if he plans to make me suffer?

I chew on my lower lip, uneasily. He made me so desperate for him in the past and denied me release more than once. Will he do that again? Do I want him to?

You didn't want me to show you that the fire was still there, that teenage hormones had fuck all to do with what burns between us. If I'd made love to you, you'd be just as angry with me. You'd accuse me of toying with your emotions, of trying to play you.

Play with me like he wants to do now. I still don't know why he's doing this. Why did he change his mind?

I'm barely aware of what is being said up on the stage, but I do feel the buzz of my cell in my bag. Taking it out, I check my messages.

Unknown number: Stop overthinking it, Kitten.

Me: I'm not.

Unknown number: Liar. Just enjoy where the evening takes you.

Eli is watching me. There's a hungry hot intensity to his gaze that keeps me transfixed. My heart slams inside my chest in a wild tempo, and my breathing turns shallow.

One second, I'm trapped by his eyes, the next, his dark inky

lashes lower as Ivan mentions the artist known as *Sin*.

“Are you okay?” my mother asks.

I clear my throat. “I just felt a little dizzy.”

“How many glasses of champagne have you had?”

“Just the one and a few sips of another.”

Brows knotting, she studies my face for a moment. “You’re looking a little flushed. I hope you’re not coming down with something.”

“No, it’s just a little hot in here.”

I focus on Ivan. He’s talking about the artist who donated the painting on the easel behind him. How Sin does not like to take the spotlight, but that he is in the audience, watching and listening to everything being said.

Eli is smiling, chatting to Gabe, with the crowd none the wiser to his identity, and as much as I try to focus on Ivan’s words about his art, I can’t.

My mind is lost in erotic memories of a blindfolded girl who had done dirty things with a monster in the dark.

CHAPTER 36

ELI

When the applause slows down, I turn to Gabe.

“I need a favor.”

His eyebrow hikes, interest sparkling in the depths of his gray eyes. “Oh?”

“The ‘Stolen Moments’ painting. Whatever the highest bid is, add ten grand and put my name on it.”

“You want to buy your own painting? Seems counterproductive.”

I shrug. “You get your money, plus an extra ten grand. I get the painting back.”

“Why put it up for auction if you don’t want to sell it?”

“I have no problem with selling it, I just discovered there’s someone who really wants it, and she won’t buy it for herself.”

“The person who owns your unconventional handkerchief and, if I’m right, the muse for most of your work?” He flicks a tattooed finger toward the panties in my pocket. “You could just make me an offer.”

“And potentially stop you making more money? No, just let them have a bidding war, then tell them an anonymous bidder won. Doesn’t matter what it costs. I’ll sign you a blank check.”

“Does she have a magic pussy?”

I direct my gaze to Harper, who’s chatting with a group of girls. “Does Harper?”

“Harper has a magic everything.” He laughs softly. “Seriously, though, Eli. Do you know what you’re doing?”

“I’m doing what I should have done years ago. I’m reminding someone where she belongs.”

“Well, far be it from me to stand in the way of committed stalking and possible kidnap. Just ensure the makeup sex makes whatever you do to annoy her worth the effort.”

“Who says I’m going to annoy her?” I turn to glance at Arabella, who’s sitting beside her mom watching the auctioneer.

“Aren’t you?” Gabe’s voice is dry.

“Until she wants to fucking murder me.”

He slaps my shoulder. “Good man. Then you should go and get started. I have to go and behave like the irresponsible rock star they all know and pretend not to love.” He winks at me and crosses the room to pull Harper away from the girls and thoroughly kiss her.

I return my gaze to Arabella. From her stiff posture, and the way her fingers are tucked between her thighs, as well as the determined set of her jaw, I know she’s purposely not looking at me. I pull out my cell.

Me: You’re not fooling me. How wet are

you right now?

Her spine snaps taut and her head turns to find me when she reads the message. She drops her cell onto her lap without replying. I laugh quietly.

Me: Why give me your panties if you're going to ignore me? Every time I turn my head, I catch the scent of how aroused you were when you took them off. That's what you wanted, right? That's why you got yourself off before you gave them to me.

Her eyes widen noticeably, and she stabs at her screen. Her response comes through seconds later.

Arabella: I DID NOT!

Me: Liar. I bet if I ran my fingers up your thigh, they'd be soaked in seconds. Tell me you're wet for me, Kitten. Tell me you're thinking about me feasting on your clit. Tell me you want me.

Her tongue sweeps out over her lips.

Me: How about a sample? A taster for the night to come. There's a staff restroom down the hall. Red or green, Kitten?

She reads the text, and glances over at me, then returns her attention to the dais in front of her. Two more items are sold, and then she turns and says something to Elena, rises to her

feet and walks out of the room. I wait until she reaches the doors, before setting off after her.

She walks at a rapid pace along the hallway, casts a look to either side of her, then slips through the door of the restroom. When I tap on the door a beat later, it opens, and her arm comes out to pull me inside.

“I’ve changed my mind.” She reaches for the panties in my pocket.

I catch her wrist and twist her arm up behind her back, pulling her against me. “No take backs.”

“Don’t be childish,” she snaps.

“Then stop being a coward.” I dip my head to run my nose along hers. “What scares you more, Hellcat—the fact that you desperately want what I give you or that none of your lovers since have ever made you feel the same way I do?”

“That’s not true.”

I spin her around to face the mirror. “You’re such a fucking liar.”

I stroke a finger over her cheek, along her jaw, down her throat and across the neckline of her dress.

“You never did answer my question.” My fingers dip beneath the material of her dress and brush over her nipple.

Her lips part, eyelashes lowering before she forces her eyes open to stare at me through the reflection.

“Look at how your body comes alive for me.” I dip my head to press a kiss to the curve of her throat. “Tell me you respond like that to everyone.”

“I *do*.”

I laugh against the soft skin beneath my mouth. “Of course, you do.”

“You’re not that special, Eli.”

I seal my lips over the pulse beating rapidly in her throat and suck, my tongue lapping over the sensitive spot, while my hand curves more firmly over her breast and squeezes. When her body sags back against my chest, I lift my head.

“I may not be that special, but *we* are. You can’t deny that, Ari.”

“You need to let me go.”

I bite a path along her neck, up to her ear. “I tried to do that. You wouldn’t let me.” My teeth graze over her earlobe. “In fact, you got upset with me.”

“I did not.”

My other hand drops to smooth up her thigh, drawing the hem of her dress up until I can see her pussy in the mirror. I cup her with my palm. My hand is tanned and dark against the paleness of her thighs.

“I can feel how wet you are. Hot. Eager. I bet my dick would slide right in.” I press my erection against her ass. “Feel what you do to me, Kitten. Tell me you want me.”

CHAPTER 37

ARABELLA

I'm trembling in Eli's arms, every cell in my body electric at his touch. He finds my clit and circles it slowly. A moan trickles from my throat, my gaze locked on the reflection of the man behind me. It's an erotic sight, and the flash of hunger I see in his expression is almost frightening.

"I..." One touch, and he's shattered my composure. "Please."

He traces a path of kisses down my neck. "Please, what?"

"Eli." His name leaves me with a breathy whine.

The pad of his finger glides over my clit, sending a spark of pleasure through me. "Tell me what you want."

I curl my hand around his wrist, but I don't tug it away. "I want you to stop."

The hand cupping my breast moves, hooking his fingers into the neckline of my dress to peel it down. "You know what you have to say to make this stop. Say it, and this will all be over."

My breasts spill out, pale against the tanned hand that snakes up to fondle my nipples one at a time.

"What do you really want?"

"To come." I choke the words out, unable to keep in the truth.

He smiles against my shoulder. “Spread your legs for me, Hellcat.”

My body obeys his command, widening my stance before I can think about it rationally. He pushes a finger inside me, and I bite my lip, focusing on the hand between my legs.

He eases a second one into me. “You’re so fucking wet.”

“Oh god.”

“Tell me you want me.” His thumb brushes over my clit.

There’s a faint voice in my head screaming to be cautious, but all my worries and fears are washed away in overwhelming sensations.

My eyes drift closed. “More.”

“Look at me.”

Eyelashes lifting, I stare into the green eyes reflected in the mirror. He pumps his fingers in and out of me in languid strokes, and I push eagerly against them.

“That’s it, Kitten. Ride my fingers.” His voice is a raspy whisper in my ear.

Every thrust of his fingers, every whisper, every bite, and kiss unravels me a little more. Moaning, I rock my pelvis forward, feeling the hard ridge of his cock in the front of his pants when I move back.

“Tell me you want me.”

My answer is a whimper, my orgasm close.

“If you want to come, tell me you want me.”

The thought of him stopping now has my stomach dropping in panic. “That’s—That’s not fair.”

He twists my nipple between his fingers. I give a small cry, at the sharp pleasure/pain of it. “We both know the truth. You do want me, don’t you, *Hellcat?*”

“I want your dick.”

He chuckles. “Good enough.”

Confusion hits me when he pulls his hand out from between my legs and steps back. I whine, feeling the emptiness keenly, but I don’t have time to protest further because he spins me around, lifts me and perches my ass on the edge of the sink. Hands settling on my thighs, he rests my legs on his shoulders and presses his mouth to my pussy. I clutch at the counter with one hand to balance myself, while Eli licks my clit, his lips fastening onto it sucking and feasting.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, grasping the soft strands tightly as his tongue dips inside me. “Yes. Yes, please.”

“I love it when you beg.” Eli’s breath tingles over my sensitive flesh. “Do it again.”

“Please. Please give me an orgasm. Eli, please. Oh god, Eli.” My pleas morph into a moan while his tongue swipes over my clit.

A knock on the restroom door breaks through the lust of fog surrounding me, and I freeze.

Eli's fingers flex against my thighs. "Ignore it."

"Hello?" A voice calls.

"Bu-busy." I gasp. "So-sorry."

"Ma'am. Are you alright in there?"

Eli's shoulders shake, and it takes me a second to realize he's laughing with his face buried in my pussy. I'm going to be mortified over this later, but at this second in time, I don't care. I need to come or I'm going to explode.

"Ye-yes," My sob of pleasure can't be contained. "Do-don't stop. I will kill you if you do."

The door handle rattles. "Can you unlock the door, Ma'am?"

Eli raises his head. "The lady said she's fine, so fuck off."

He goes back to ravaging my pussy with his tongue and mouth. I cup one of my breasts and pinch my nipple. Panting, writhing, everything within me coils tighter and tighter until an orgasm rushes over me, sending me spinning into pure bliss.

"Look at me when you're falling apart, Kitten. Don't hide it from me."

I force my eyes to open and look down. Eli's face is still between my legs, but his eyes are on me, burning with hunger and lust, while his tongue swirls and licks, laps and flicks at my clit. My hips buck, muscles turning rigid, then slowly relax with the aftermath of my release.

Eli presses a kiss to my inner thighs, then straightens. He runs his tongue over both of my nipples, then closes his lips around each one to suck then kiss the hardened peaks.

I sigh and let my eyes close. “That was ...”

“Just the appetizer. We have the rest of the evening ahead of us.”

I shiver, my pussy pulsing with anticipation. His fingers are good, but it’s nothing compared to having his cock inside me.

Gentle hands straighten me up. Standing between my spread legs, he tugs up the bodice of my dress, covering my breasts.

“I’m going to unlock the door, and then you’re coming back to my hotel with me.” He brushes a loose strand of hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear. “Red or green, Kitten?”

I nibble on my lower lip for a second. “Do I get my panties back?”

“No.”

“Are you going to fuck me if I leave with you now?”

Eli nods but doesn’t smile. “Yes.”

Tendrils of uncertainty whisper through my head, but I ignore them. I want more. If this is the last time, I get to be with him like this, I want to squeeze every moment of enjoyment out of it. Make memories to tuck away for the future when we’re a million miles apart again.

I lift my chin and meet his watchful gaze. “Green.”

CHAPTER 38

ELI

Whoever knocked on the door has gone by the time I unlock it and step out. Arabella follows me a moment later, cheeks flushed and eyes still a little hazy from the orgasm I gave her. With one hand pressed to the small of her back, I lead her along the hallway to the front of the gallery.

“Do you have a coat?”

She blinks up at me. I hide a smile.

“Focus, Hellcat.” I turn her toward the room set aside for coats and jackets. “Did you bring a coat?”

“I ... umm ... yes.”

“Wait here.” I walk over to the woman in charge of taking and dispensing the coats. “Arabella Gray.”

“One moment, sir.” She disappears through the door and comes back a moment later with a long black coat over one arm. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I take it from her and turn back. Arabella hasn’t moved, arms wrapped around her waist as she stares out of the window. I move up behind her and drape the coat over her shoulders. “Do you need to tell anyone you’re leaving?”

She pushes her arms into the sleeves and shakes her head. “I’ll text Mom. She arranged for a driver, so she’ll be okay.”

I nod and curl my fingers around hers. She stares down at them, then up at me, brow furrowed. “What are you doing, Eli?”

“Making sure I don’t lose you. Come on. I drove here.” I push open the door and step out into the cold New York air.

A valet comes toward us. “Mr. Travers, would you like your car?”

“Yes, please.”

I step back against the side of the building while we wait. Arabella is shivering, clutching the front of her coat closed with her free hand. I use the one I’m holding to tug her in front of me, then release it, to wrap around her waist and pull her into my chest. She tenses, flattening her palm against me to push away. I tighten my hold.

“I’ve just had my tongue deep inside your pussy while you came all over my face. I’m taking you back to my hotel room where I’m going to fuck you six ways to Sunday, but sharing body heat to keep you warm is crossing a line?”

“We’re in public.”

I lean back and frown down at her. “Are you ashamed to be seen with me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

She huffs, then slips her arms around my waist. “*Nothing*. It’s just ... weird.” She presses her face against my chest.

“How are you so warm?”

“Just a hotblooded monster, I guess,” I deadpan.

She doesn't reply to that, and we wait for my car in silence. When it pulls up, I reach back to unhook her arms.

“Here we are.” I take her hand, and lead her to the road, where the valet has the passenger door open.

He hands me the keys. I swap them for a folded hundred-dollar bill, slam the door, sealing Arabella inside and then stride around and climb in behind the wheel.

We're deep in traffic before she breaks the silence.

“Where are you staying?”

“Royal Crown Plaza.” I keep my eyes on the road and reach across the center console to run a finger up her thigh. “Pull your dress up.”

“We're in the middle of traffic.”

“Tinted windows. No one can see.”

“You need to look where you're going.”

“That's my intention.” One corner of my mouth tips up.

It takes her a minute to understand my meaning. She gasps.

“Oh my god. *No*, Eli! Watch the road!”

“I *am* watching the road.” My fingers pluck at the hem of her dress, drawing it up her thigh. “I want to play with you while I drive.” I brush along the outer lips of her pussy.

“Eli!”

“Let me in, Kitten.”

“It’s not safe!”

“And going out to meet a stranger in the dark when you were eighteen was?” I push one finger inside her. Her gasp makes my dick hard. “Pull the top of your dress down. Play with your nipples.”

When she shakes her head, I pull my finger free and lift it to my lips. “You’re no fun, Kitten.” My tongue licks up her flavor and I make a contented noise in the back of my throat. “I love how you taste.”

“How far away is the hotel?”

“Why? Eager for my dick, Hellcat?”

“I haven’t been to the Royal Crown Plaza before.”

“It’s nice.” I slant a look at her. “The elevator is mirrored. You’ll be able to watch yourself come while I eat your pussy in it.”

“You’re ... not going to do that ...” Her voice is faint.

“Is that a statement or a question? If it’s the first, you’re wrong. If it’s the latter, then yes, I most certainly am.” I cross the lanes and turn into the parking lot for the hotel. “And here we are.” I pull into a space and cut the engine, then turn to look at her. “Full disclosure.” I reach for her hands. “If you come into the hotel with me, I have no intention of letting you leave until you admit that closure on our relationship is off the

table.”

She tries to pull her hands away. I tighten my hold.

“I’m serious. It’s not closure you’re after, it’s acceptance that you *like* the things I do to you. That the games we play turn you on.” I drop one hand to tangle my fingers into her hair and tip her head up. “Admit that nothing compares to what you had with me.”

“That’s easy to admit to. I doubt *anyone* has experienced what you put me through.”

“Put you through, Hellcat? I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“I’m not talking about what you did as Sin.”

“If memory serves, you crossed the line a few times yourself. I seem to recall a special coffee you gave me.”

She glares at me.

“Red or green, Kitten?” I lean closer. “I promise I’ll make it worth your while. No repeat performance of the cabin. You want me to suck your nipples until you come? You got it. You want my tongue on your clit? It’s all yours. You want me to fuck you until you scream? As many times as you can handle,” I whisper.

Her breath hitches.

“All you have to say is green.”

Her fingers curl into the front of my shirt and her eyes lock on mine. “I want you to kiss me.”

“Tell me you want me.”

“I want your mouth.”

I shake my head. “Not good enough, Princess.”

“I want your cock.”

“Try again.”

“I want you to make me come.”

“And I will. When you admit you want *me*.”

She tugs on my shirt. I turn my head, so her lips connect with my jaw.

“Eli!”

“Nope. I’ll kiss you when you admit you want me.”

“Not going to happen.”

I unclip my seatbelt and throw open the car door. “Then you’ll have to be satisfied with my mouth everywhere except on yours.” I unpeel her fingers from my shirt and climb out.

Her eyes are on me when I open the door and hold out my hand. “Time to decide. Red or green?”

She takes my hand, and steps out of the car. “Green.”

I guide her into the hotel, pull out my keycard and call the elevator. When the doors slide open, I step back to allow her inside, then follow her in. When the doors close, I back her against the wall and drop to my knees.

“The penthouse is on the top floor.” I hold up the keycard

between two fingers. “Tap the screen with that.” My hands push up the skirt of her dress and I kiss my way up her thigh. “Open your legs.”

“How many floors until—” She gasps when my tongue connects with her clit.

I give her a long leisurely lick before drawing back to answer her. “I can listen to the whole of MCR’s ‘Teenagers’ before we reach the penthouse.” I press a kiss to her thigh. “We’re not leaving the elevator until you come.”

“But what if someone gets in?”

“Then they’ll have a show to watch on their journey.”

She’s sobbing, writhing against my face, fingers clutching at my hair as she comes on my tongue when the doors open into the penthouse. I don’t give her a chance to catch her breath. I rise to my feet, grab her hand, and pull her out of the elevator.

I pull her dress over her head and toss it to one side, then wrap my hands around her thighs and lift her. Her legs wind around my hips and her mouth attacks my throat while I carry her through the bedroom.

“Take your clothes off.” Her demand is emphasized by her hand dropping to push between our bodies and under the waistband of my pants. “I want to touch you.”

I drop her onto the mattress and unknot my tie. Her eyes follow the movement. I lift an eyebrow.

“Want me to tie you up, Kitten?”

She shakes her head. “Not tonight.”

Her fingers work at the buttons on my shirt, until she can slip her hands inside and smooth them over my chest. She kneels up on the edge of the bed, pulls the shirt out of my pants then unbuckles my belt and unzips my pants. When she shoves them down my legs and frees my dick, she gives a soft sigh. Her hand wraps around it and strokes from base to tip. Her thumb smooths over the head, smearing precum over the tip.

“Take me in your mouth.”

She leans back to look up at me. “Kiss me.”

“Tell me you want me.”

She smiles but doesn't reply, bending her head to open her mouth and suck me in. My jaw clenches. It's become a fucking battle of wills. I need to hear her tell me. I need to know she wants me.

Now it's a case of who will give in first.

I have a strong suspicion I know who's going to lose ... and it's not going to be her.

My hands land in her hair, but I don't try and take control of her movements as she swallows my dick. The sensation of her tongue licking at me, the pressure as she sucks my length, and swallows when I hit the back of her throat is like molten lava coursing through my veins. I don't think I will ever get enough

of her touch, her mouth, the soft sounds she makes.

When the first signs of orgasm tighten my nerves, I give a gentle tug on her hair and step back, easing my dick out of her mouth.

“Lie back.” My words are accompanied by my hand curving over her shoulder and guiding her down onto the mattress so I can crawl above her. I push one leg between her thighs and press it against her pussy while my mouth finds her nipple and sucks it in. I swirl around the hardened peak with my tongue, and her back arches as she moans.

“Eli, please.”

I give a sharp nip, drawing a hiss from her, and lift my head. “Tell me you want me.”

“I want you to fuck me.”

“Not good enough.” My fingers find her clit and I tease and torment her until she’s clutching at my arms, the sheets, my hair. “Tell me you want me.”

“Eli, *please*.” Her flailing hand finds my dick, curls around it and squeezes. “I want *this*.” Her legs lift, hook around my hips. “Now, please.”

I reach between our bodies to fist my dick, lining it up with her entrance. “Look at me.”

Her eyes open, dark blue and hazy with desire.

“Ari.” I cup her jaw with my hand and brush my thumb over her lips while I kiss a path along her throat.

“Fuck me like you hate me.”

My lips find her ear. “But what if I don’t hate you?”

“Then fuck me like you need me.”

“I *do* need you.”

A small frown pulls her brows together. She reaches up to touch my cheek, my jaw, my lips. “Kiss me,” she whispers.

“Tell me you want me. I need to hear you say it.”
Apparently, I’m not above pleading.

Her fingers slide into my hair, and I let her pull my head down until my mouth is hovering just above hers.

“I want you.”

I thrust inside her and capture her lips with mine at the same time.

CHAPTER 39

ARABELLA

Eli's tongue duels for dominance with mine, the flicker of vulnerability I'd seen in his eyes seconds ago forgotten in the heat of his mouth. Wrapping my legs around his hips, I hook them behind his ass and pull him deeper inside me.

He thrusts into me and there's nothing gentle about it. It's as though he's caught up in the same driving dark desire that consumes me when I'm around him. He pulls away from the kiss.

"No," I bring his lips back to mine.

His low groan in the back of his throat sets every inch of my skin on fire. I tangle my fingers in his long hair, desperate to have him even closer.

This.

This is what I've missed. What I've wanted.

All this wild, turbulent heat between us. It's never been the same with anyone else. When we're together like this, everything combusts into a fiery, primal need that neither of us can control.

Eli breaks the kiss, his expression tight with focus. "This, Kitten. This is what you can't have with anyone else." His words mirror my thoughts.

The truth is, he's right, and for one brief second, that

terrifies me before I'm overwhelmed with sensation. He moves over and into me at a punishing pace. I writhe beneath him, matching his rhythm. His lips find the side of my neck, sucking at the skin hard enough to leave a mark. He flicks his tongue and then bites down until I gasp.

My brain goes haywire, and a strangled sob tears from my mouth as I orgasm.

“That’s it, Kitten. Give it to me.” His voice is rough.

My nails run down his back, digging into the muscles flexing underneath them as he continues to thrust into me.

When I climax a second time, he swallows the sound with his mouth, and with a few hard thrusts, he shudders, finishing inside me. Dazed, and panting, I go limp under him, my whole body melting into the mattress.

He lowers his head, his cheek resting against my breasts, and I curl my fingers in his hair, lying beneath him, high on post-sex bliss.

Why does his weight always feel so good on top of me?

I smile dreamily at the thought.

Eli kisses the top of my breast. “Still with me?”

I sigh. “Hmmm.”

He chuckles and kisses his way up to my shoulder. “Sleepy?”

“I’m sure you can think of ways to keep me awake.”

“Oh, I can.” He eases out of me. “Stay right there, and don’t move.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

He crawls off the bed and walks toward a door, treating me to the sight of his perfect ass and the tattoos covering the scars on his back. As he disappears through it, I close my eyes, enjoying the pleasurable hum still radiating through my body.

I’ve never been able to orgasm with the same intensity as I do when Eli is inside me. No vibrator has been invented that’s able to match what he does to me. It’s as though his dick has magic all its own. I giggle at the thought.

“What’s so funny?”

I open my eyes to discover him standing at the end of the bed, holding a cloth. “Nothing.”

He bends and wipes the wet cloth between my legs, cleaning up the mess we’ve made. “It made you smile. I want to know what it is.”

I’m still high and floaty from the sex we’ve just had, and I giggle again. “That your dick is magical.”

Amusement glitters in his gaze. “I fuck you once, and you’re already addicted?”

I shake my head. “I never said that.”

“The goofy smile does.”

“It’s a joke. I don’t mean it.”

He walks back toward the bathroom. “There’s no shame in admitting the truth, Hellcat.”

“You’re such an asshole!”

CHAPTER 40

ELI

When I return to the bedroom for the second time, it's to find it empty.

“Arabella?” I walk into the living room through the other door and discover her pulling on her dress. “What are you doing?”

“We fucked, now I need to go back to my hotel.”

“You're going to—” I cross the room and pull her around to face me. “You're *leaving*?”

“I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression.”

“About what?”

“About how magical your dick is.”

“You said it, not me.”

“It was a *joke*.” She pulls out of my grip and snatches up her coat from where I'd tossed it. “Could you please put some clothes on?”

“Why? Scared my *magic dick* will stop you from leaving?”

She rolls her eyes and walks over to the elevator to stab at the button. I follow her.

“So, you're allowed to joke, but I'm not? Is that what's happening here?”

I thought we were getting somewhere. She melted in my arms; I admitted I needed her ... I thought we'd rekindled our connection ... and now she's *leaving*?

I step in front of the elevator doors. "Why are you running away?"

"I'm not running." Her gaze is focused somewhere beyond my shoulder. She won't even fucking look at me.

"Ari—"

"Stop it! Stop calling me that."

"Why?" I rake a hand through my hair. "I'm so fucking confused right now," I admit in a rough tone when she doesn't reply. "I can't joke, I can't call you Ari. What else? I can't want you? I can't need you?"

"You *don't* need me. You just like knowing you can dangle your silly little games in front of me and I'll fold like a house of cards." She glares at me.

The doors behind me slide open. I hold out my arms to stop her from entering.

"Move out of the way."

"No. Not until you explain what changed in the last few minutes."

Her eyelashes lower, but not before I see a sheen of tears. Taking a cautious step forward, I press a finger beneath her chin and tip her face up.

“What did I do?”

“Does it matter? You got what you wanted. Yet again, I let you get under my skin and ended up in your bed. You win, Eli. You *win*, okay?”

“What did I win? Because from where I’m fucking standing it looks like I’m losing.” If she thinks walking away again is how winning looks to me, then she’s insane. “The one thing I can’t seem to do with you is *win*.”

“You proved that all it takes is a dirty text, a risky game, and a whisper or two and I’m putty in your hands. I’ll do whatever you want because you make me feel good. It’s toxic, Eli. I’m not being pulled back into your games, your dares, your *fucking* red and green.”

The words hit me like well-aimed arrows. She thinks it’s all a game, that I’m still the same eighteen-year-old boy trying to fuck up her life. I take a deep breath, pushing aside the anger trying to force its way out.

“If I’d invited you to dinner, would you have said yes?”

Her brow furrows. “What?”

“It’s an easy question. Would you have had dinner with me?”

“Is this another game?” She shakes her head. “I’m not doing this anymore. Put some clothes on. What happened to the boy who hated being naked in front of people?”

“He grew up.” The doors finally shut behind me. “Answer

the question. If I'd come up to you tonight and asked you to have dinner with me, what would you have said?"

"No. It's *never* that straightforward with you."

"But me texting you and telling you to take off your panties and then spend a sold-out event without your underwear has you wet and desperate for my dick?"

"That's not—" Her cheeks turn pink.

I press my palms to her face and step closer. "Think about it. You're not interested in dinner and dancing, with a sweet goodnight kiss on the steps of your hotel. That's not what gets heat rushing through your veins. You *like* the games we play."

"That's not true."

"No?" I'm on stable ground now. She thinks the games are my way of having control over her when it's the furthest thing from the truth. It's my way of giving her the excitement she craves, that she's *always* craved.

"No!"

"So, if I invited you to have dinner with me tomorrow, you'd spend the day in a constant state of arousal, anticipating the night to come?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You're not wet at the thought of it?"

Her lips compress and she angles a narrow-eyed glare at me. "Of course not."

I lower my head until our mouths are millimeters apart. “What if I invited you to dinner, and told you we’d have company?” I whisper, “What if I told you to wear a dress without any underwear underneath it? What if I gave you a little toy to wear that I control with my phone and told you I intended to play with it during dinner?”

Her lips part, eyes darkening.

“What if I told you that if you were a good girl and managed not to come at any point during the meal with our friends, I’d eat your pussy for dessert in the back of the car on the ride back to the hotel?” I brush my lips over hers. “Are you wet now?”

“It’s not normal.” A tear falls down her cheek. I kiss it away.

“It’s *our* normal.” I nip at her bottom lip. “Stay.”

“I don’t think I should. We’re not good together.”

“We’re *perfect* together.”

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

I use my thumb to free it. “Stay with me.”

“One night.”

I shake my head. “One night is never going to be enough.” I run my nose along hers. “When I told you I needed you, I meant it, Ari.”

Awareness gradually encroaches on my dreams. I become

aware of things in stages. The warmth of Arabella's body pressed against mine, the weight of her head resting on my arm, the sound of her soft breathing while she sleeps, the scent of her perfume teasing my nose, and her naked ass pressing against my dick.

That last one opens my eyes. I'm lying on my side, Arabella tucked in front of me. I have one arm beneath her head, and the other resting across her waist. Her arm is on top of mine, our fingers locked together.

Her hair tickles my face as I lift my head just enough to be able to kiss the bare shoulder peeking out from beneath the sheets. She mumbles something, but doesn't open her eyes, wriggling her ass until my dick is wedged between the two firm cheeks. I groan quietly, unable to resist the siren song of her body and untangle my fingers so I can palm her breast.

Her nipple hardens beneath my touch, and a soft sigh escapes her lips. She shifts again, ass rubbing up and down my dick. Her leg moves, lifts and rests along mine and the position is far too tempting to ignore. I give a slow roll of my hips, and my dick glides into her pussy. She's so fucking wet that there's no resistance at all to my invasion.

"Ari?" I whisper her name, nibbling my way across her shoulder.

In response, she reaches back, nails biting into my ass as she drags me deeper.

"Eli." My name on her lips is all I need, and I move, rolling

us both until she's lying face down with me above her. I slide one hand around her waist and lift her ass until she's on her knees and I can stroke her clit while I bury my dick as deep inside her as I can get.

I kiss her shoulders, her back. I suck on the soft, fragrant skin of her throat, leaving my teeth marks, *branding* her with my presence as I thrust in and out in a steady rhythm ... and then a voice sounds over our soft groans and pants.

“Eli? Are you awake? I thought I'd take you for breakfast.”

Ari stiffens beneath me. “Oh my god, is that my *mom*?”

I don't stop moving, pinning her in place beneath me when she tries to escape. “I'm not done with you yet.”

“Eli!” Her protest is cut short when I press my thumb against her clit, rubbing and stroking while my dick drives in and out of her wet, willing body.

“Better come quick, Hellcat. I'm not stopping until you do.”

And that is all it takes for her to fall over the edge. Her body contracts around me, sending me into my own release and we both collapse, panting, onto the mattress.

“Eli?” Elena's voice is closer.

“I thought you said only the keycard can get people up here.”

I press a kiss to her shoulder and roll off her. “I left her name at the reception as someone who can be allowed up. They'll have activated the elevator. She won't come in here,

though.” I sit up. “I’ll go and stall her. Grab whatever you want from the closet.”

I twist and lean over her to steal a kiss. “Word of advice. Don’t try and sneak out of a window to avoid your mom. We’re too high up and it’s fucking freezing out there.”

I stand and cross to the closet to pull out a pair of sweats and a ratty old t-shirt. Arabella is still lying on the bed, face buried into the pillows.

“If you go back to sleep and leave me to face the wrath of your mom, I’m not going to be happy.”

She lifts her head to peer at me through tangled blonde hair. “What will you do?”

I lift one shoulder in a shrug. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

Her lips move into a sultry little smile, and she burrows back beneath the sheets. “That’s not really a deterrent.”

I stand and watch her for a moment or two longer, then shake my head with a low laugh and walk out to face my stepmother.

CHAPTER 41

ARABELLA

I wait until Eli leaves the bedroom before dragging a pillow over my head. This was supposed to have been one night, so how have I wound up in his bed this morning?

When I told you I needed you, I meant it, Ari.

My stomach flutters as I recall his words. Does he mean that? He doesn't want closure. Eli wants something different. He wants more. A fling?

Stop lying to yourself. You know what he wants.

I ignore the little voice in my head.

The voices in the other room are too low for me to hear clearly, so I ignore them while I think through the conversation we'd had last night.

He's right.

I *wouldn't* have gone to dinner with him if he'd asked. All the adrenaline and excitement of the games we played hooked me into coming back to his hotel with him. The promise of pleasure that only he can give me. We might have been apart all these years, but he still knows me better than I know myself.

Is that why I've not been able to have a normal relationship with another man? All the dating was tedious and led to boredom quickly. Both men I'd been with were sweet and

gentle, the complete opposite of Eli. We had things in common, but it wasn't enough of a connection for anything to last.

Because Eli is my type.

My first love. My first *everything*.

Our games at Churchill Bradley Academy when we were eighteen shaped my sexual desires.

Does that make me some kind of sexual deviant? This need I have for the dirty, naughty things he makes me do when we're together.

I push the pillow off my head, and crawl out from under the blankets.

My mother's voice is asking questions, I can tell by the lilt to her voice.

Maybe he'll go out to breakfast with her and leave me here so I can make my escape without my mom seeing me. I dismiss that idea as soon as it forms.

He's made it clear that he thinks I'm going to run as soon as I can. There's no way he'll leave me alone in the penthouse. He might have teased about the window, but there had been a serious note to his voice that makes me wonder if he hadn't been joking at all.

I hurry into the bathroom and examine my appearance in the mirror above the sink. My hair is a disheveled mess. I try to put it in some kind of order. Hickeys litter both sides of my

neck, the darkening bruises bright against my skin. I brush my fingertips lightly over some of them.

It's been ten years since I wore the marks of Eli's loving. And here we are again. A handful of hours, and he's already branded me inside and out.

I wash my face, grab the soft white fluffy robe off the back of the door and thrust my arms through it, and snap the belt closed around my waist.

I'm tempted to hide in here until my mother leaves, but when I walk back into the bedroom, I can still hear them talking. I pause near the doorway, to listen.

"If I'd known you brought someone back with you last night, I would have called first." My mother laughs. "I hope I haven't embarrassed the poor thing."

"I left her hiding under the blankets" Eli's chuckle sends a shiver of lust through me. "I don't think she expected us to have company this morning."

"I'm not sure how long it's been since I've seen you smiling that way. She must be special."

"She is."

"Oh! Before I forget. Arabella texted me last night to say she was staying with a friend." My mother's voice turns thick with worry. "I messaged her this morning to check in, but I haven't heard anything back."

Fuck.

I close my eyes and cringe. The whole point of the message had been to make sure she didn't worry.

“Do you know who she left the charity event with last night? I know she's a grown adult, and I shouldn't worry, but I do.”

“She's—”

Panic rises, and I step out of the bedroom. “Right here.”

My mother is sitting on one of the couches, and Eli is standing by the coffee table, arms folded. Her eyes widen, lips parting in surprise when she sees me. Eli meets my gaze and I look away quickly.

My mother's sharp eyes dart over me before she arches an eyebrow.

“I guess I really shouldn't be shocked to see you here. I'm not sure why I didn't piece it together sooner.”

“I—”

“Ari and I had a long talk after the event last night.” Eli cuts in before I can say anything. He strides across the room and drapes his arm over my shoulders.

“A long talk, hmm?” my mom repeats. “Is that what you kids call it nowadays?”

Heat burns my cheeks. “Eli—”

He brushes his knuckles down my cheek. “You don't have to be embarrassed.”

“I don’t?” I reply.

“It’s better if Elena knows what’s going on. Sneaking around isn’t my thing. It might have worked when we were eighteen, but not anymore.”

He doesn’t want to keep the fact we spent the night fucking a secret?

All I can do is stare up at him. “It’s not?”

My mother claps her hands. “Does this mean you are back together?”

Eli smiles, eyes not leaving mine. “I’m working on it.”

“It’s about time I got some grandbabies to dote on.”

“Babies?” I echo, turning my attention toward her in horror.

What is happening? How did I even get into this conversation? I should have stayed hidden in the bedroom where it was safe, instead of blindly rushing out here in panic.

Eli’s arm around my shoulders tightens. “I think you’re moving a little too fast. We’re going to have breakfast, and then dinner tonight and see where we stand.”

“I don’t think—”

His mouth captures mine, silencing my protest. I dig my nails into the front of his t-shirt, holding on tight, and fight not to melt into a puddle at his feet.

When he finally lets me up for air, I feel like I’ve run a marathon. I’m hot, dizzy, and panting.

“No running away.” He drops another kiss on my lips. “I’m not giving up without a fight this time.”

I blink, the fog of lust making it hard to think.

How the hell has everything changed in less than twenty-four hours?

I’m confused, a little frightened, and turned on all at the same time.

What is Eli doing to me?

CHAPTER 42

ELI

The look of horror in Arabella's eyes when Elena mentions grandkids is almost laughable ... or would be if I wasn't sure that she was already looking for a reason to run. So, I do the only thing I can think of to distract her and kiss her.

When her body softens against mine, I lift my head.

"No more running away, Ari." My warning is soft. "I'm not giving up without a fight this time." It's probably the worst thing I can say to her, but I don't want her turning around later and accusing me of being underhand about what my intentions are.

I step away then to give her a moment to rebalance and turn to Elena.

"If it's okay with you, I'm going to order room service for breakfast, then I'll drive Ari back to her hotel. I'm supposed to be dining with Miles and Ivan tonight. Can we reschedule our dinner for when I'm back in the Hamptons in a couple of days?"

Elena purses her lips, and I think, for a moment, that she's going to argue, but then her gaze shifts to Arabella, who's toying with the belt holding her robe closed, and her eyes soften.

"Okay, we can do that." She pushes to her feet and crosses

to where Arabella is standing. “Call me later, darling.” She presses a kiss to her daughter’s cheek, then smiles at me. “Walk me out?”

I walk with her to the elevator and push the call button. “I remember when she broke up with you the first time,” she says in a low voice. “I know the reasons why it ended.” She rests a hand on my arm. “But, Eli, even though you’re both older now, you still need to talk and work things out.”

“I know.”

The doors swish open. Elena hooks a hand around my neck and pulls my head down to kiss my cheek. “Your father would be *so* proud of you.”

I smile. “That means a lot.”

I stay where I am until the doors close, then turn to face the room. Arabella has moved to the couch and is perched on the edge, gnawing on that damned bottom lip of hers.

“What would you like for breakfast?” I cross the room to where the hotel phone sits. There’s a menu beside it. I pick it up and toss it onto her lap. “I’m going to take a quick shower. Do you want to order while I get cleaned up?” I walk to the bedroom door, then stop and turn. “Ari?”

Her head lifts, and she twists to look at me.

“If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind not disappearing while I’m in the shower?” I smile at her scowl. “I’m serious. We’ll eat, and then I’ll drive you back to your

hotel room, I promise.”

I don't wait for her reply and pull the bedroom door closed behind me.

I shower, shave ... Well, tidy up the growth coating my jaw ... and dress in a pair of black jeans and a plain black t-shirt. My feet are bare and I'm still rubbing my hair with a towel when I go through to the living room. I half-expect it to be empty, but I'm greeted by a serving cart, loaded with food and a carafe of coffee. Arabella is curled up at one end of the couch, nibbling on a croissant. I can't stop the wide smile that stretches my lips when I see her.

She pauses, flakes of pastry coating her lips, and frowns at me. I rein in the desire to cross the room and lick them off her mouth and, instead, turn my attention to the platters of food. I lift the lids off various plates until I locate the bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast, load up a plate, pour myself a coffee and take the seat on the opposite end of the couch.

“I'm supposed to be meeting Miles for dinner tonight. Will you come with me?”

“You were *serious* about dinner?”

“Absolutely.” I take a sip of coffee and eye her over the rim. “I don't have any toys, though. If that's a dealbreaker, we can always go shopping first.”

She chokes on her croissant. I fight to keep my expression

blank.

“Although, I’m not sure how Miles would feel about watching his best friend come all over the table, so maybe we should work up to that.”

“I’m not ... you’re not ...” she splutters.

I let the laugh break free. “I’m just teasing. We’ll go for dinner, *without toys*. You can even wear underwear and I won’t complain ... too loudly.”

She gapes at me.

“Ivan has a business proposal he wants to present to me,” I explain into the silence. “I told Miles I’d hear him out.” I roll the mug across my lips. “We’ve never been out as a couple before. I think it’s past due, don’t you?”

“We’re not a couple.”

You’re moving too fast. Kellan’s voice cautions.

I don’t let anything show on my face. Hearing that my dead friend pops by to give me unsolicited advice occasionally would make me sound crazy and send her running.

“A couple of friends,” I amend smoothly.

“What happened to us not being able to just go out for dinner and dancing?” She arches an eyebrow.

“I said dinner and dancing wouldn’t have made you come home with me. That was last night. This is a new day. I also said dinner and dancing wasn’t enough to turn you on. That

still stands.” I take another mouthful of coffee. “How about it, Arabella? Do you think we could spend an evening together without needing to play games, or have sex, or fight?” I throw the words out as a challenge. “Or is that all we are? What was it you used to say to me?” I set down my coffee and scoop up a forkful of eggs. “Feed me. Fuck Me. Fight me? I think I’ve checked off all three. So how about a new challenge? Spend time with me. Get to know me.”

Remember how much you fucking loved me.

CHAPTER 43

ARABELLA

I tear a piece of croissant off with my fingers and try to ignore how fast my heart is racing in my chest.

He wants me to get to know him. Did I ever know the boy I'd fallen in love with?

Our lives had been messed up at eighteen, woven together with hate, sex, pain, and death.

What do I really know about the man standing before me now?

I nod. "Okay. I'll go to dinner with you, Miles, and Ivan as *friends*."

Eli's expression doesn't change, but I don't miss a flicker of emotion in those watchful green eyes. "Thank you."

"It's just dinner. You don't have to thank me." I pop the piece of croissant into my mouth and chew.

"You could have told me to fuck off again."

"I enjoy spending time with Miles and Ivan."

"And I hope you'll enjoy spending it with me too."

I don't reply, finishing off my food.

"Do you want a shower before you leave?"

"Yes," I rise from my seat on the couch, and move across to

the bedroom. “I won’t be long.”

“I’d offer to scrub your back for you, but if I do that, we won’t ever leave the penthouse.”

I stop and turn in the doorway. “Having sex in the shower isn’t getting to know each other, remember? No games, no dares.”

“I was just teasing.” Eli smiles faintly. “But you’re right. You need to get back to your hotel, catch up on some sleep, and then get ready for dinner.”

Recalling the delicious way he kept me up for most of the night, I press my thighs together, trying to quell the throbbing the memory causes. Without another word, I hurry into the bedroom and through to the bathroom. Once the door is shut behind me, I lean against the smooth wood and close my eyes.

Yesterday I hated Eli Travers.

Now, I don’t know how I feel about him.

I also can’t believe my mother mentioned grandkids in front of him. But I shouldn’t be surprised. It isn’t the first time she’s brought babies up in conversations with me.

I know that wariness is making me cautious and defensive. I’m ready to bolt, yet something keeps making me stay.

I pull open the door to the shower and twist on the water. Stripping out of the robe, I move in under the spray, and tip my face up to the cascading hot water. I take my time, linger over washing my hair, and soap myself down with a body

wash that smells like Eli. By the time I step out, my fingers are pruned, and my skin is flushed.

I leave the bathroom to find the bedroom empty. *Someone* has remade the bed and left my black dress, panties, and heels on the mattress. I dry my hair, tug on my clothes and shoes, then go in search of Eli.

He's in the living room, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans and staring out the window at the panoramic view of the city. His expression is pensive, lost in thought, brows drawn together, jaw tight.

Spying my bag and coat draped over one of the chairs, I cross the room to collect them. "I'm ready."

Eli starts at the sound of my voice. Without a word, he moves to join me and takes my coat from me. He helps me into it, placing a light kiss to my cheek before he links his fingers with mine.

"What's the name of your hotel?"

I rattle off the name and address. He presses the call button for the elevator, and as soon as the doors open, pulls me inside and taps the control panel for the lobby.

"The trip down won't be as much fun as the one going up was." His dry words break the silence.

Glancing up, I find him smiling at me. My cheeks flush as I recall his mouth between my legs and my cries of pleasure as he'd licked and sucked me to orgasm before we even reached

the penthouse.

My attention moves around the mirrored interior. “We could have been caught.”

“You enjoy the risk of discovery.”

I do ... with *him* ... but I’m not going to admit that.

“Itching to play again, Eli?”

“Not right now. But if you ask me nicely in the future, I might indulge you,” He meets my stare with a candid look of his own. “The challenge is to get to know who I am *now*, remember?”

A challenge I haven’t verbally accepted, but he fails to mention that.

The doors slide open, and we step out into the hotel foyer. I keep pace with his long strides as we exit the building and head toward the parking lot. He opens the passenger door for me and closes it once I’m in. Clicking on my seatbelt, I track his movements as he rounds the car to climb into the driver’s side.

He pulls his belt over his body, securing it into place. “Warm enough?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Eli doesn’t try to touch me on the drive this time. If anything, he’s extra polite and courteous, asking me about my stay in New York, and what I did for New Year’s Eve. It feels surreal not to be bickering or arguing.

It doesn't take long to reach the place I'm staying. He parks the car, and escorts me up to my hotel room.

I fumble for the card key in my bag outside my door, dropping it twice, until Eli takes it from me. Rummaging around until he finds the keycard, he holds it against the door, pulls down the handle, and pushes it open.

I expect him to come inside, but he doesn't. Instead, he hands back my bag, and his fingers move up to caress my jaw. His movements are slow enough that I could turn away, but I don't. When he leans close, my eyelashes lower. Eli's lips brush against mine in a barely there kiss.

When he draws away, he caresses my cheek with the back of his hand. "Try not to miss me too much. I'll be back to pick you up before seven."

"Seven?" I repeat, my eyes opening slowly.

"For dinner."

"Oh ... yes."

His hand drops away from my face. "Get some rest."

Hugging my bag to my chest, I step into my room. Eli remains motionless right up until I close the door. Part of me wonders if he intends to stand out in the hallways for the entire day to ensure I don't leave. A small slightly hysterical laugh escapes me as I back across the room until my legs hit the mattress, and I crumple down onto it.

Now I'm finally alone, my thoughts tumble around inside

my head, and my worries return in full force.

Oh, God, what am I doing?

How can I protect my heart from Eli Travers? It's always been his, but I don't think I can survive getting hurt all over again. All he has to do is take me into his arms, and I turn to Jello in his embrace.

I need to get back to L.A.

My eyes land on my suitcase where I left it by the wall. I lunge for it and throw it open on the bed. I kick off my shoes, strip out of my dress and panties, then find fresh clothes. My cell rings as I tug on a pair of jeans.

Is Eli checking up on me?

Retrieving it from my bag, I'm relieved to see it's a different name on the screen.

"Hey, Miles."

"Good morning. What are you up to?"

I switch the call over to speakerphone and drop the cell on the mattress so I can put on my bra. "Packing."

"Wait, what? But you have another day here."

"I need to go home."

There's a pause before he speaks again. "What's happened?"

"I had sex with Eli last night." The words come out in a rush.

“You and Eli hooked up?”

I struggle into my sweater and tug it down over my breasts.

“Yes.”

“And now you’re running away?”

“I am *not*.”

“Sounds like you are to me. What did he do to make you want to flee?”

I pick up my black dress, panties, and shoes and dump them in my suitcase. “He asked me out to dinner with you and Ivan tonight.”

“Truly scandalous. How dare he ask you out to dinner.” Miles gasps, then his voice returns to a more normal tone. “I think you’re overthinking things. Bella. Stop what you’re doing and take a nice deep breath for me.”

I breathe through my nose and release it through my mouth.

“Again.”

I scowl down at my cell. “Miles—”

“Did you enjoy the sex?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point.”

“You got scared.”

My heart jolts at the truth in his words. “It was supposed to be one night, and then Eli said he wanted more.”

“And this is a bad thing? Why?”

I gnaw on my lower lip until it stings. “Because ... I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Alright ... Repeat after me. I am not going to run away.”

I don’t reply.

“I can’t hear you.” Miles singsongs.

“I ... I am not going to run away.”

“I am going to dinner with Eli and my best friend in the entire world.”

“My *ex*-best friend.”

“I heard that.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “I’ll go to dinner.”

“Good, and *don’t* change your mind. I will not forgive you if you don’t show.”

I flip the top of my case closed.

Maybe Miles is right. Maybe I am overthinking things. It’s just dinner, after all. He hasn’t asked for anything beyond that.

Tomorrow, I have to head back to L.A. Eli mentioned going to the house in the Hamptons, and that’s thousands of miles away from my apartment in Los Angeles.

He might claim he wants more, but I’m no longer the girl he knew. He says he wants me to get to know him.

But if he really wants to be with me, he needs to prove he won’t hurt me again.

CHAPTER 44

ELI

When I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror, I turn toward it and straighten my tie. That turns into smoothing a hand over my hair, and then dipping my fingers into my pocket to toy with my cell.

I've never felt so fucking nervous in my entire life. And why? Because I'm certain when the doors of the elevator slide open and I walk down to Arabella's room, I'm going to find it empty and her gone.

I've had to resist checking in with her all day long, telling myself that she'll think I'm falling back into my old ways of wanting to know her every move. That's why she said she left me. Because I was *smothering* her. But it's been hard to rein in the need to make sure she hasn't run.

The doors swish open, and I step out. The hallway beyond is empty, and the closer I get to Ari's room, the faster my heart beats.

What if she's changed her mind? What if she's run?

If I chase her, does that mean she's right and I'm still the same person I used to be? Or does it mean I know what I want and am determined to give us both a second chance?

You're overthinking things. Just knock on the door.

My hand lifts and raps on the wood, almost of its own

accord, and then I hold my breath and wait. It feels like an eternity passes, but it's likely only a minute or two, before the door swings open and Arabella is framed in the doorway.

My gaze runs over her, from the hair pulled back into a high ponytail, with a few tendrils loose either side of her face, the teardrop-shaped silver earrings that accentuate the curve of her throat, and the matching necklace which dips down into the valley between her breasts.

The dress she's wearing is black, similar to the one she wore last night but shorter with thin straps holding up the bodice, and she's wearing shoes with heels, which brings the top of her head level with my eyes.

"Ready to go?" I'm amazed at how level my voice is.

"Let me just grab my coat and purse." She turns back into the room, and I'm presented with the sight of her bare back.

Fuck me. Has she dressed like this on purpose? Maybe she's trying to test me?

When she returns, I take the coat from her and slip it over her shoulders, then hold out my arm. Her fingers curl over the sleeve of my jacket.

"Where are we going to eat?"

"There's a quiet place I know a few blocks away from here. I booked a table for eight. Miles and Ivan are meeting us there."

"Eight? But it's only seven."

“I thought we could get drinks first.”

“Oh.”

I push the call button for the elevator and glance over at it. “Just drinks, Ari. There’s a bar at the restaurant. I wouldn’t be surprised if Miles is already there and waiting.”

When the doors open, there are three other people inside the small compartment. I wait for Arabella to enter, then follow her inside and move to stand in a corner. The ride down is taken in silence until the elevator stops with a gentle bump in the lobby. I offer her my arm again and lead her out of the hotel.

“My car is just along here.” I stop beside a black sedan and open the back passenger door. She frowns at me. “I have a driver tonight.”

A faint blush stains her cheeks, and I’m pretty sure she’s thinking about what I said to her last night when I asked if she’d come to dinner with me and told her the things I would do.

“No games, Ari,” I remind her. “I just don’t want to drink and drive.” I wait until we’re both settled on the back seat and then wave my hand toward the driver. “No privacy glass to hide us away, either.”

The car pulls into the traffic and it’s a couple of minutes before she speaks.

“What did you do today?”

“I had to go back to the gallery where I had my showing the other night to sign off on the sold items.”

“Did you sell many?”

“Everything that had a for sale sign on it.”

“I ... umm ... saw one of your showings in L.A. before Christmas. At Ivan’s gallery. He showed me the private collection you display but don’t put out for sale.”

I keep my attention on the window. “What did you think?”

“I was a little shocked.”

“Shocked? Why?”

“I didn’t realize you’d drawn so many images of me.”

My mind goes to the stacks of sketchbooks back at the cabin. If she had any fucking idea just how many of my drawings were of her, she’d probably get a restraining order against me.

“You’re easy to draw.” I turn to face her and reach out to brush a finger over her cheek. “The perfect muse.”

CHAPTER 45

ARABELLA

Heat rises up the back of my neck, and I have to resist biting my lip. “I’m your muse?”

Eli’s hand drops from my cheek. “Who do you think the blonde woman is in all my art?”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“It’s you.”

I gape at him. “Me? In those paintings? The ones you’ve sold for thousands of dollars?”

He smiles slightly, his eyes never leaving my face. “People always ask me who my inspiration is.”

“And what did you tell them?”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t mentioned your name to any of them. Your secret is safe.”

I frown, recalling the beautiful ethereal female figure entwined in all of the paintings by the artist Sin that I’ve seen. “But it can’t be me.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s beautiful.”

“So are you.”

“But—”

“You liked that painting I donated to Gabe’s charity event last night?”

“Yes, I did,” I admit softly. “To be honest, I admired the pieces I saw in Ivan’s gallery, but I had no idea it was you until I saw the sketch of me in the private display.”

“So, you’re a fan?” There’s a teasing note to his tone. One I’ve only heard a few times throughout our history.

“I like art. I felt an emotional connection to your pieces. After learning *you* were Sin, I know why.” I turn my face away from him and stare out the window at the passing streets beyond. “They echo the past.”

“Churchill Bradley Academy.” Eli’s voice is low.

“Where everything started.”

Eli is silent for a beat. “That’s in the past. We’re different people now.”

“Is it? *Are* we?” I twist back to him and study his face. “I see it mirrored in all your paintings, and I know it still haunts me.”

“Ari—”

I shake my head quickly. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why this all spilled out tonight.”

His attention flicks down to my lap, where my hands are clasped tightly together. “You’re tense.”

“A little nervous.”

“Of what? Going out to dinner with friends?”

“Yes,” I reply, and turn away from him.

I'm scared of going out with you. Of opening a door to something that will break me.

“Look at me.” Placing his finger under my chin, he draws my face back around to him. “Don’t get stuck inside your head.”

My eyes move to his mouth, the same mouth that gave me so much pleasure last night. “I’m not—”

“Yes, you are. We might not have been together long, Ari, but that’s one thing I do know about you. I doubt it’s changed. You overthink things.”

“Miles says the same thing.” Chills race up and down my spine at his touch.

He releases me and settles back. “Let’s just see what happens. One step at a time. Can you do that for me?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him we only have tonight because I’m flying home tomorrow morning, but I don’t. Instead, I nod.

CHAPTER 46

ELI

“What would you like to drink?” I hand Arabella’s coat to the woman standing beside the cloakroom check-in and take the ticket in return.

“A glass of wine would be lovely, thank you.”

My hand drops to the small of her back and I guide her across to the bar. The female bartender smiles at me.

“A glass of white wine and a bourbon, please.”

“Coming right up.”

“What did Gabe mean last night when he said he wants to do a photoshoot amongst your stained glass?”

“Just a hobby.”

“A hobby that caught the eye of one of the biggest rock bands around.”

She shakes her head. “Oh look. Our drinks.” She takes the glass of wine and takes a mouthful. “When do you think Miles and Ivan will arrive?”

I let her change the subject without argument. “I doubt they’ll be far behind us. We can go and see if our table is ready or stay here.”

She takes another mouthful of wine. “Let’s wait here.”

“Is everything okay?” Her nose is buried in the glass, and

she won't look at me.

“What? Yes, fine. Everything is fine. Have you eaten here before?”

“A few times, yeah.”

Silence falls between us, awkward and heavy. Arabella finishes her wine and turns toward the bar. “Can I get another one, please?” While the bartender refills her glass, she pulls her cell from her purse. “I think I'll text Miles and see where they are.”

“Ari.” She looks up at her name. I cover her cell with my hand. “Relax.”

“But—”

“Why are you so nervous? We're in a room full of people, and I've given you my word that I won't try to do anything.”

Her tongue sweeps over her lips. “This isn't what we do, Eli. This isn't *us*.”

My head tilts to one side. “It can be.”

She shakes her head. “A leopard can't change its spots.”

“Maybe not, but they can learn from their mistakes and evolve to survive.”

“Is that what you're doing?”

“Learning or evolving?” My smile is faint. “A little of both, maybe.”

Her blue eyes hold mine, something kindling in their depths,

but before I can really put a name to it, she spins away and picks up her wine glass. “Why don’t we go and see if the table is ready. I’d like to sit down.”

I’m left with the distinct impression that wasn’t what she’d wanted to say, but I follow her to where the host stands beside a small table, checking names on his tablet. He looks up when we reach him.

“Table for four. Travers,” I say. “We’re a little early, so I understand if our table isn’t ready yet.”

He sweeps his finger down a list, then nods. “No, that’s perfectly fine, Mr. Travers. We have your table ready for you. If you’ll follow me ...”

He leads us to a quiet corner of the room, and pulls out a chair for Arabella, then places a set of menus on the center of the table. “Would you like to wait for your guests or order now?”

“Bring a bottle of Domaine Leflaive Batard Montrachet Grand Cru and another glass of bourbon. We’ll wait for the others to arrive before ordering food.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“What is Domaine Lefl-lef ... whatever you called it?”

“Domaine Leflaive Batard Montrachet Grand Cru. It’s a Chardonnay. I think you’ll like it.”

“At five grand a bottle, she better like it,” a cheerful voice interrupts.

I look up to find Miles and Ivan standing beside the table. Miles bends to kiss Arabella's cheek. "Eli, this is Ivan. My fiancé."

I stand and hold out my hand "Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise. I've been curious about you for many years, both as the artist behind the Sin name ... and as a childhood friend of Miles'."

My lips twitch and I glance at Miles. "Friends would be stretching what we were, don't you think?"

Miles gives me a sad smile. "Maybe. For a while. But I'd like to think we became close to being friends toward the end."

CHAPTER 47

ARABELLA

Having my best friend and Eli together in the same room again feels strange, stirring unwanted memories I've only ventured back to in short-lived therapy sessions. I can see traces of the eighteen-year-old boys they had once been in their features. We've all grown up but are still chained to events that happened so long ago.

"Everything okay?" Miles asks.

I nod, plastering a smile on my lips. "Yes, it's just weird the three of us being back together like this."

"It has been a long time," he agrees. "Ten years."

"You and Eli weren't friends?" Ivan turns in his seat, surveying the other two men at the table.

"I was Arabella's friend," Miles explains. "Eli was—"

"The Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy," Eli finishes, voice dry.

"The boy everyone fears." I lift my glass, take a sip of wine, and avoid Eli's gaze.

"*Used* to fear. That's not who I am anymore."

No. He's evolving, learning, and surviving. The picture of the boy in my head I'd known has shifted to the grumpy, bitter lumberjack version of Eli I'd been introduced to over

Christmas. This new 3.0 version of Eli is completely different again, and I'm not sure how to deal with it.

"I read somewhere that the school shut down after a second student's death." Ivan's accented voice is filled with curiosity.

Miles frowns at his fiancé. "You googled it?"

"After you mentioned the name of the academy, it was easy to find details about what happened. Newspaper articles, blog posts, the police reports—"

My stomach clenches, and I set down my drink before anyone notices how my hand is shaking. "I'm starving." My voice is too bright, too high. "What's everyone going to order?" I lift a hand to attract the attention of our server.

He comes over, the bottle of wine Eli ordered in his hand. "Are you ready to order?"

My gaze skims over the neat black writing on the menu, and I choose the first thing that looks appealing. "I'll have the steak, please. Well done."

Ivan and Eli both request steak as well, except they want it medium-rare, while Miles orders chicken. Our server takes down the order and hurries away.

I drain my glass of white wine and reach for the bottle of Chardonnay, but Eli beats me to it.

He fills half my glass. "Maybe you should slow down a little? Wait for the food to arrive."

I wave my hand at him. "I'm fine."

“Has Bella shown you her art?” Ivan pours some of the Chardonnay into his and Miles’ glasses. “She’s very talented.”

“It’s nothing compared to what Eli does.”

“No, she hasn’t.” Eli doesn’t look at me.

“I have photographs on my phone.” Ivan is already unlocking his cell.

I shake my head. “I’m sure he doesn’t want to see them.”

“Oh, but I do.”

Miles frowns at me.

I don’t move as his fiancé hands Eli his phone, my gaze catching a glimpse at the image on the screen. The broken angel in the shadows stares up longingly at heaven. Ivan’s photograph has captured the stained glass at an angle. The light pours right through it, bringing the colored glass to life.

Eli studies it and then looks at me. “You did this?”

“In the spare room of her apartment,” Ivan answers when I don’t. “She hides them away so no one can see them, but when Miles mentioned them to me, I got curious. I keep trying to persuade her to let me show them off in my gallery. I’m hoping that now Forgotten Legacy wants to do a photoshoot with them, she’ll give in to my desire to make her famous.”

“A therapist I saw a few years ago said I should channel some of my energy into something creative. To express my feelings and emotions.” I shift uncomfortably on my seat. “I saw a documentary on how stained glass was made, and I was

hooked.”

Because it reminded me of the stained glass in the chapel. The way the colors had danced across the dusty stone floor. How beautiful it had been, how it had calmed me before it became tainted by pain and death.

“It’s beautiful.” Eli swipes his finger across the screen to the next photograph, expression intent.

Everything inside me freezes at the image that fills the screen.

This one is of a stone knight lying on an altar, his red armor bright against the gray stone beneath him and golden skies above him. He’s clutching a sword to his chest. A fallen warrior laid to rest.

Eli stares down at the picture. His face drains of color, shock flares in his eyes, which morphs into pain before he lowers his lashes to hide it. My heart aches, and I curse Ivan for talking me into letting him take photographs of my obsessions.

“Excuse me. I need to use the restroom.” I rise quickly and leave the table at a rapid pace.

As much as I love Ivan, I wish he hadn’t shown Eli my creations. The whole reason Miles doesn’t like them is because he can see reflections of our shared pain in my work. All the trauma and sorrow. Pieces of events that have scarred us deeply.

I’ve almost reached the restroom when a hand grabs my

wrist. Expecting it to be Eli, I tense, fingers curling into fists. But it's Miles who's behind me.

“What's wrong with you tonight?”

“I don't know what you mean.”

He draws me into a nook off the hallway leading to the restrooms. “You're acting strange.”

“You talked me into coming to dinner instead of letting me fly home to LA.”

He tilts his head, brows drawing together as if he's trying to work out what I'm thinking. “You're as jumpy as a kitten.”

Kitten. The word on his lips twists my stomach into knots. “I didn't expect us to talk about the past over dinner.”

“Is that why you're hitting the wine? You know you can't handle too much alcohol.”

“Everything feels so surreal. Eli is ... he's different from how I remember.”

“He's grown up, just like the rest of us.” Miles wraps an arm around my shoulders and hugs me. “I don't like talking about what happened either, Bella, but it *did* happen. It's part of us. We can't just ignore it.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“We have to face it eventually.”

“I thought I had.”

He blows out a breath. “We both know that's a lie. You

decided to ignore it, but you can't. Not anymore.”

He's right. It's been hanging over my head all this time, guiding all my decisions in life. Now, I can't avoid it, not with Eli right in front of me.

CHAPTER 48

ELI

It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to get up and follow her when she flees from the table. Miles must have seen the battle on my face because he stands.

“I’ll go.”

He pats Ivan’s shoulder as he passes him. I lean back on my chair and take a sip of bourbon.

“You’re not what I expected.”

My eyes lift to meet Ivan’s. “How so?”

“You must know of the whispers surrounding the artist, *Sin*. The reclusive artist who doesn’t go out in public because of the hideous way he looks.”

I snort. “Last I checked, I wasn’t Quasimodo. I’ve also been present at a few shows.”

“Ahh yes, but you’ve never stepped forward and acknowledged who you are.” Ivan taps the stem of his wine glass. “Why *do* you keep your identity a secret?”

“There’s really nothing nefarious about it. I just like to be left alone.”

“Arabella said you live in the middle of a forest, surrounded by bears.”

“I’d hardly say I’m surrounded by bears, but there are bears

in the forest, yeah. We generally leave each other alone.”

“To hear her talk, the bears have more reason to be scared of you than you of them.”

“Depending on her mood, I’m responsible for every bad thing that happens.”

“I was very surprised when we set up your show at my gallery in L.A. Seeing her and Miles in your paintings was unexpected.”

“I don’t broadcast their names.”

“From the way she reacted when I showed them to her, you didn’t tell them either.”

My fingers clench on the glass. “You *showed* her?” I think back to what she said about the showing she attended. She mentioned seeing a picture of her. I just didn’t connect the dots.

“Of course. I had fifteen paintings by a famous artist with images of the man I live with in them, albeit a younger version, yet still recognizable *and* his best friend. Since neither of them mentioned having any knowledge of Sin or his art, I was curious.”

“That must have come as a shock to them both.”

“A little, yes.” His lips curl at one corner. “But it also forced Miles to open up about his past a little more. I knew something dark had happened. He was resistant to even the idea of a relationship when we first met. He still doesn’t say a lot, but I

know he lost someone he loved.”

“Kellan.” Saying his name out loud feels strange.

“Is he the other boy in the images?”

I nod. “He was the second student who died. The reason Churchill Bradley closed.” Or one of the reasons, anyway.

“Who was the first?”

There’s a distinct lack of humor in the laugh that escapes me. “My other best friend, Zoey.” I take a large swallow of bourbon and lift my hand to attract the roving server’s attention. “Another bourbon, please. Make it a double.”

“Both the kids who died were close to you?”

I nod. “Didn’t your research tell you that? They were murdered by someone who had become hyper-obsessed with me, although no one, least of all me, realized it at the time.”

“Evan Ridley.” Miles says from behind me.” Of all the people I would have pinned as a psychopath, it wasn’t him.” He slips back into his seat.

“Where’s Ari?”

“Just freshening up. She’ll be back in a minute.”

“I read that he was committed to a psychiatric facility.” Ivan refills his glass.

“He appeals every couple of years.” I pause when the server returns with my drink. “Thanks. Could you bring a bottle over?” I take a large swallow. “At his last appeal, they agreed

to move him to another prison. According to his psychiatrist, he no longer needs to be under their watch.”

“You don’t agree?”

“Fuck, no. He killed two of my friends. Miles is lucky he isn’t dead. He almost made me—” I snap my mouth closed as Arabella takes her seat.

“You should come to L.A. I’d really like to showcase some of your lesser known art.” Ivan’s change of subject is smooth.

“You mean all the art I keep hidden from prying eyes?” My voice is dry. “I don’t think Ari would appreciate that.”

“Why not?”

I slide a glance at the woman in question. “Because she has the starring role in most of them.”

The appetizers arrive then, forestalling any further talk of my art, but I can’t miss the glances Arabella keeps sending in my direction. The chatter turns to more lighthearted subjects—music, books, the latest movies Miles has dragged Ari to see—and it’s not until we’re lingering over dessert and coffee that Ivan returns the conversation to a possible showing in Los Angeles.

“We could combine your artwork with a showing of Arabella’s stained glass.”

“No.” Arabella’s voice is flat.

“But Bella—”

She shakes her head. "I said no, Ivan. My art is for *me*, no one else."

CHAPTER 49

ARABELLA

How much artwork does Eli have with me in it?

He said I'm his muse, but surely, I can't be the only one. What kind of poses does he have me in? Heat flushes through me as my head fills with erotic images.

Oh my god, he wouldn't, would he?

The drawing in Ivan's gallery had been an image of my face post orgasm.

Has he drawn more of me like that?

I take a sip of my drink, the alcohol buzzing through my veins. I'm not even sure at this point how many glasses I've had.

"I have to agree with Ivan. You should let him show it for you," Eli takes the bottle from me before I fill my glass.

I cock my head. "Why?"

"Because I can see your passion in the photographs. I can only imagine how breathtaking the actual pieces look up close."

"Miles doesn't like them."

"Probably because they evoke certain emotions from him. That's what art does, Ari. It makes us feel things."

"Even if they are painful?"

His eyes darken, flicking down to my mouth. “That’s the mark of a great artist. And yes, that’s part of the fascination. People are drawn to different things.”

“If you can change her mind about a shared exhibit, you’ll get the chance to see her work up close,” Ivan coaxes.

“What do you say, Ari?” Eli smiles. “Want to share an exhibition with Sin?”

My lips part, ready to say no but different words come out. “I’ll think about it.”

“At least it’s not a no this time.” Ivan chuckles.

Miles straightens, stretching a little in his chair. “As much as I’ve enjoyed the evening, I think we should be heading back to our hotel. Are you all packed for tomorrow, Bella?”

“Tomorrow?” Eli repeats.

“I’m going back to L.A.” My voice is tinged with regret.

Eli’s eyes flash “When were you going to tell me?”

“I thought my mom had mentioned it.”

Miles eyes us both. “I didn’t mean to get you into trouble. I thought you would have mentioned it already.”

Calling the server, Eli asks for the check. While he’s distracted, I slip away to the restroom to freshen up, swaying a little as I walk through the restaurant.

Maybe I should have told him about my flight, but I didn’t think it was important. It’s not like we planned to see each

other again.

Guilt niggles at me. He's been nothing but nice to me this evening. As strange as it feels not to have him sending me dares and playing dirty games, I've enjoyed the last few hours. For someone who lives in the middle of the woods alone, he's up to date with movies and books.

Just admit it—I hadn't wanted to tell him.

I straighten the straps of my dress and examine my flushed face in the mirror above the sink. My skin warms, thinking about how Eli's gaze had moved over what I was wearing a few times during the meal, the way heat simmered in his eyes.

A secretive smile curls my lips up, and I walk into the first empty stall and lock myself inside. Pulling up my dress, I hook my fingers in the side of my panties and drag them down. I wiggle as they fall down my thighs and pool my ankles. I bend, pick them up, and bundle the lace into the bottom of my bag, then step back out to wash my hands, dry them and leave.

The three men are waiting for me at our table, and we go to the cloakroom check-in and retrieve our coats. It's dark and cold when we step out onto the sidewalk. Shivering, I turn up the collar of my coat to keep the lash of the icy wind off my face.

Miles kisses my cheek. "Call me tomorrow."

"I will," I promise.

Ivan hugs me. "See you back in L.A. We can arrange that

show for the both of you.”

I smile, but don't reply.

As they say their goodbyes to Eli, I watch him shake their hands. A second later, he's ushering me toward a black car and the driver waiting for us. I slip into the back, scooting over awkwardly to give him room to get in beside me. The driver closes the door, and I click my seatbelt into place.

“When were you going to tell me you were leaving?” Eli's voice is low.

“Tonight, after dinner. You know I live in L.A. and that I was just here to spend time with my mom.”

“I can't talk you into staying longer?” His voice is rough in the darkness.

“I have to get back to work.”

The driver starts the engine and maneuvers us out into the flow of traffic.

I turn my head and study Eli's profile. He doesn't look happy that I've said I couldn't stay, and I reach for his face before I fully register what I'm doing. I've barely touched his cheek when he shifts his attention to me. Leaning toward him, I tilt my head and press my lips to his. It's meant as a silent apology, soft, and gentle.

Eli stills but doesn't push me away.

I flick my tongue against the seam of his lips and moan softly when he opens for me. The second I feel his mouth

grow hungrier on mine, everything changes. I kiss him like he's the air I need to breathe, and I'd suffocate without him.

But it's not enough. It's *never* enough with this man.

I unclip my seatbelt, and crawl over the seat toward him.

"What are you doing?" His voice is husky.

Hiking up my dress, I straddle his lap, smiling at the way the hard ridge of his erection presses against me through his pants.

"I want you."

"You're drunk," He runs his fingers over my ponytail. "We're in moving traffic, and there's no privacy glass."

"You're drunk too. I want you to fuck me." I try to kiss him again. "You know you want to."

Eli avoids my mouth. "Baby, the driver can see us."

"I don't care."

His hand skims up my thighs toward my hip, then stops. "Where are your *panties*?"

"I took them off before we left the restaurant." My arms wrap lightly around his neck. "I know how much you like me without them."

"Tonight isn't supposed to be about sex, remember?"

"But we *are* sex." I nip and bite my way along his neck. "We've always been about sex. Mind-blowing, *amazing* sex. That's what we are. It's us. It's always been us. Perfect together in bed."

His hands grip my hips as I rock back and forward on his lap, enjoying the friction it brings, but it's not enough. I need him inside me. I need him so deep that I lose all sense of where I begin and where he ends.

He groans. "We should have had more."

"I don't want more."

Eli freezes. "What?"

"I want your dick." Reaching for his belt, I undo it.

"You don't want more than sex?"

"All I want right now is for you to fuck me."

"Ari—"

His hands grab my wrist before I can slip my hand down beneath the waistband of his underwear to touch the pulsing erection I can feel pressing against my pussy.

"Please, Eli, I need you. Let me repay you for dinner tonight."

CHAPTER 50

ELI

“Stop it.” My voice snaps out like a whipcrack. “I am not fucking you in the back of this car.”

“But you said—” There’s a slur to her words, as she fights to free her hands from my grip. “*Please*, Eli.” Her lower lip thrusts out into a pout.

“I *said* sex is off the table tonight. No sex, no dares, no fucking games.” I drop her wrists and wrap my hands around her waist to lift her off me. “Sit fucking still and put your seatbelt back on.”

“Is everything okay back there?” The driver’s eyes meet mine through the mirror.

“Fine. Can we please get back to the hotel?”

Arabella’s hand crawls onto my thigh and slides inwards. I catch it in mine. “I said *no*.”

“I thought you wanted me?” Tears fill her eyes, and I groan.

“I *do* want you, but not like this. You’re drunk.”

“You’ve been drinking, too.” Her voice wobbles.

“Drinking, yes. Drunk, no.”

She huffs and turns her face away to look out of the window. I keep my eyes on her, and after a beat of silence, her lips tip up into a smile. Leaning down, she picks up her purse from the

floor and takes out her cell. A moment later, *my* cell chimes.

Arabella: I'm going to go bak to teh hotel and touvh myseld, imaginining my fingerss r yourrs as they dip in and out of my pusst.

My lips twitch at the typos proving she's not sober, and the anger that had tried to overtake me at her admission that it's just sex between us settles down. She's drunk and horny. She wants me to fuck her, so is saying whatever she thinks will make that happen. Maybe she thinks that all *I* want is sex. Maybe it's what she truly believes.

No matter how much my dick wants to slide between her thighs and take what she's offering, until she's sober and I can ask her, I'm not going to react to it. I made a promise to her years ago that I wouldn't touch her while she was drunk, and I'm not about to break it now.

Arabella: Maybe I'll sens you a photo of wha your missng.

I lift my head to look at her and arch an eyebrow. She shrugs and smirks.

"I look forward to it. It can go with the rest of my collection."

She sniffs and tosses her head. I bite back a laugh. Even though she's basically just told me all she wants is sex, I can't help but like this drunk version of the girl I know. She's more forward, more open with her desires. I just wish we were in a

position where I didn't have to refuse her. But right now, right here, isn't the moment to indulge her needs.

The car slows to a stop, and I unclip my belt. "I won't be long. Wait here," I instruct the driver and climb out to walk around to the other side of the car. Opening the door, I hold out my hand. "Come on, Hellcat, let's get you to your room."

Her fingers wrap around mine, and she stumbles out of the car, crashing into me. Sliding my arm around her waist, I hold her steady and walk her indoors and into the first available elevator. Her arms lift and curl around my neck before the doors have even closed.

"Stay tonight?" Her lips press kisses along my jaw.

I loop my arms around her waist. "No."

"Why not? I want you so much. I *ache*. I need you inside me." Her body rubs up against mine. "Please, Eli?"

"Sorry, Kitten. As much as I love hearing you beg, I'm not doing this with you tonight."

Her fingers toy with the hair at the nape of my neck. "But I want to get on my knees for you. Take you into my mouth. Suck you and lick you." She spoils the erotic image she's building with a tiny hiccup, which I'm thankful for.

"If sober you wants to revisit this, then I'm open to being persuaded." I use two fingers to tip her head up and kiss the tip of her nose. "But I'm pretty confident sober you is going to be curled up in an embarrassed little hungover ball of

mortification tomorrow.”

The doors swish open, and I guide her out.

“What if *Sin* comes to visit me instead?” We stop outside her door and her fingers lift to trail across my jaw. She sighs. “I miss him. He didn’t care about my feelings. He just wanted to make me get off for him.”

“He definitely liked watching you get off for him.”

“Then why can’t *Sin* come out to play with me tonight?”

I stroke a finger over her lips. “He left your blindfold at home.” Her tongue comes out to lick at my fingertip.

“I could just keep my eyes closed.”

I chuckle and reach for her purse to take out her keycard. “Some other time, Kitten.” Leaning past her, I unlock the door and open it. “In you go.” I rest my hands on her shoulders and turn her toward the room.

“Are you coming in?”

“No. Go on.” I drop her purse just inside the door and put her keycard on top of it. “What time is your flight tomorrow?”

“If you kiss me, I’ll tell you.”

I lean forward. Her eyelashes fall as her eyes close. I press a kiss to her cheek and take a step back. Her eyes fly open, and she pouts.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I know. Good night, Ari.” I don’t wait for her reply, pull the

door closed and check the lock has activated, then walk back to the elevator and down to where the car waited for me.

My cell chimes as the car pulls into traffic. I tap on the messages and find a photograph from Arabella.

She's completely naked, standing in the bathroom, one hand between her legs holding herself open, revealing pretty pink flesh, all wet and glistening.

My dick strains against my pants. My jaw clenches.

“Fuck.”

I want nothing more than to tell the driver to turn around and go back, but I don't. Instead, I close the photograph and switch off my cell, then let my head drop against the seat and close my eyes.

This fucking woman is going to be the death of me.

CHAPTER 51

ARABELLA

I groan and peel my eyes open. There's a jackhammer inside my skull, drilling a hole in my head, and my eyes feel dry and gritty. Everything hurts. I roll onto my side carefully, and squint at the light peeking through the curtains.

What time is it?

My flight leaves for L.A. at ten, and I need to be at the airport on time. I reach for my phone, groping around for it on the bedside table. With a press of a button, I turn it on. It's seven in the morning. While I'm contemplating another thirty-minute nap, a message notification pops up.

Mom: Safe trip home, sweetheart. Call me when you get back. Love you.

I need a painkiller and breakfast before I feel human enough to face my flight. The events of last night are hazy. We went to dinner with Miles and Ivan. I remember saying goodbye to them. After that, not so much.

I'm about to drop my phone on the pillow beside me when I see the time on the last message to Eli. I texted him last night?

Me: Mak my pusst hapy

My heart stutters in my chest.

Oh, no, what did I do? How drunk was I last night?

Panic turns my blood to ice. I open the messages and read.

Me: I'm going to go bak to teh hotel and touvh myseld, imaginining my fingerss r yourrs as they dip in and out of my pusst.

Me: Maybe I'll sens you a photo of wha your missng.

Me: HeY com bak for funh :)

Me: Wher r u?

Me: I want sext

Me: My pusst missss u

Me: Yur no funh

Me: Plz fuk me

Horror fills me when I see the attached photos.

In the first one, I'm naked, holding myself open for him to see. In the next, I'm sucking my fingers, my eyes half closed, cheeks flushed. The third is between my spread legs showing Eli my wet, glistening pussy lips again.

I close the images, and nausea rises when I see the video attachment.

“Oh no, no, no.”

I tap on it.

I'm lying on the bed, the phone propped up by something. A pillow? I'm naked, my hand between my spread legs as my fingers slip in and out of my pussy.

“Eli ... ohhh fuck me. Fuck me like you hate me.”

I’m rocking from side to side, writhing as I touch myself.

“Eli ... yessshh—” The words cut off as I roll off the side of the bed. There’s a yelp, followed by a thud. A second later, the video ends.

Oh my god, why did I send this to him?

Not sexy!

Cringing with embarrassment, I toss my cell onto the mattress and cover my face with my hands.

Fragmented memories stir.

We were in the back of the car. I kissed him.

I groan.

I begged him to fuck me. He said no.

I’m not sure if I should be happy about his rejection or disappointed. Maybe having me sprawled all over him, begging for his cock, put him off.

The fact he hasn’t replied to any of my drunk rambling makes it worse.

I throw off the covers and climb out of bed. My legs feel like Jello, and my head is pounding. My suitcase is on the floor, and I rummage around inside it until I find some painkillers. I swallow two with some water from the bathroom tap.

No matter how bad I feel, I need to get to the airport. Time

is ticking.

I take a quick shower, then dress in comfortable jeans and a sweater. I twist my hair up into a bun and secure it with a band. There are no messages from Eli when I finally summon up the courage to check my cell.

What am I expecting? For him to tease me over what I sent him.

I cringe again, recalling now I told him I wanted to have sex to repay him for dinner. I'm such an idiot. God knows what he thinks of me now.

"Focus, Arabella," I mutter, and drag on my jacket. "You need to get to the airport."

With one final check of the room, I ensure I have everything, dig a pair of dark glasses out of my bag and slip them onto my nose. I loop the strap of my bag over my shoulder and then grab the handle of my suitcase.

I take a deep breath just before I reach the door, and brace myself for an uncomfortable journey. At least the painkillers have kicked in, and my head is no longer pounding. I just feel sick at the thought of what Eli must be thinking.

I stop at the reception desk to call an Uber, and I check my phone again. Still no response from Eli.

Is that a good thing? Or bad? Should I message him and apologize?

I climb into the Uber when it pulls up in front of me.

What if he's decided one night is enough?

He didn't make any mention of seeing me again after he found out I was going back to L.A.

I start to type out a text.

Me: I was drunk.

I delete the words and try again.

Me: I'm not a sex maniac, and I don't generally beg men for their cock.

"Nope." I tap delete again.

Me: I didn't mean any of it.

Delete.

Me: I'm not addicted to your dick.

Delete. Delete.

Me: Thanks for the sex.

Oh my god, no!

Delete. Delete. Delete.

Me: Guess I'll see you around.

That sounds stupid.

Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

Me: Call me if you're ever in L.A.

He never goes to L.A.

Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

“Fuck.” I take a breath, switch off my phone, and shove it into my pocket. Tension snakes through my muscles, and I turn to watch as the streets pass outside the window.

I won't text him. If he wants to, he can contact me. Texting him now will only lead to more embarrassment.

Eli Travers and the way he makes me feel is not something I can deal with right this second.

CHAPTER 52

ELI

“Eli? Are you awake?” Elena’s voice echoes around the suite.

“Out on the balcony.” I’m leaning over the railing, looking out over the city, and drinking coffee.

My father’s widow joins me. “I tried calling you, but it kept going through to your voicemail.”

I frown, then the memory of switching my cell off comes to me. “Oh ... yeah. I turned it off.”

“*Why?*”

Because if I hadn’t, the temptation would have been too much and I’d have ended up with my dick buried so deep into your daughter’s pussy, they might have needed a tow rope to drag me out.

“Just needed some quiet time.”

“Are you still coming to the Hamptons with me?”

I push away and go inside. “Yeah. I just need to finish packing. I can’t stay long, though. I have to get back home.”

“The Hamptons *is* your home.” She follows me.

“You know what I mean.”

“I wish you wouldn’t isolate yourself out there.”

“I like it. It’s quiet and there are no distractions.” At least,

unless a certain blonde turns back up. I go into the bedroom and find my cell, where I tossed it on the floor. Picking it up, I turn it on.

It immediately starts chiming with incoming messages.

Arabella: HeY com bak for funh :)

Arabella: Wher r u?

Arabella: I want sext

Arabella: My pusst missss u

Arabella: Yur no funh

Arabella: Plz fuk me

A series of photographs follow the texts, and then a video. When she falls off the bed with a thud and a yelp, I can't hold back my laughter.

“What's that?”

I tap stop on the video and pocket my cell.

“Just texts from a friend.”

It's weird walking into the house after all this time. The last time I was here was on the day of my dad's funeral. After the ceremony, I'd gone to my bedroom, packed everything I could and fled to the cabin. I haven't been back since.

Elena doesn't speak when I step inside, her heels clicking on the wooden floor as she crosses to the hallway leading further

into the house. I let her go, my gaze moving over the interior. Nothing has changed. I wouldn't be surprised to find my dad standing inside his study.

I'm still standing in the doorway when Elena returns a few minutes later.

"Is everything okay?"

My eyes snap to her. "Yeah, fine."

"Would you like coffee? If you want to stay for a few days, I can call Poppy to come into work."

"What does she do now?" Elena doesn't live here, so the house has spent most of the past five years empty.

She smiles. "You haven't terminated their contracts, Eli, so they get paid regardless of whether anyone is here or not." She hooks her arm through mine. "Come on. Let's go through to the kitchen."

My steps slow as we reach my dad's office. Elena sighs.

"I haven't gone in there since ..." She looks away, but not before I see the sheen of tears in her eyes. "I did love him very much, you know."

"I know." My voice is soft.

She clears her throat. "Enough of that. How are you and Bella doing?"

"It's complicated."

"So, you're not together?"

We reach the kitchen and I pull out a chair and sit down while Elena busies herself with the coffee machine.

“She’s running, but I’m working on it.”

“Running?”

I laugh quietly. “I told her we should take sex off the table and get to know each other.”

“And how did she take that?” She places a mug of coffee in front of me.

“Well ...” I take an exaggerated look around the room. “She’s not here.”

Elena takes the seat opposite me. “It’s a shame you can’t go back and have a fresh start. That first meeting for you both set the tone for your entire relationship.”

I take a sip of coffee. “We were young. I was angry.”

“Yes, you were. And vindictive. And manipulative. And—”

“Okay, okay ...” I laugh. “I was a little shit. I get it.”

“And yet she fell in love with you, all the same.”

“Until I fucked it up.”

She stretches her hand across the table and rests it on top of mine. “Eli, what the pair of you went through ... your relationship was *never* going to survive that. You were too young, too traumatized.”

My laugh this time is humorless. “Most of it caused by me.”

“You need to forgive yourself.” She squeezes my fingers.
“That’s why you stay in the cabin, isn’t it? You’re punishing yourself for everything that happened. Eli, you aren’t to blame for what that boy did.”

“But if I’d been paying more attention, Kellan would never —”

“No! Don’t you *dare* blame yourself for that. The only person responsible for what happened to your friend is Evan Ridley.”

CHAPTER 53

ARABELLA

“I hope you are not planning on any more trips, *Mademoiselle* Gray. So much time off is not acceptable.”

I stiffen in my seat at the sharp edge in my boss’s voice and turn to face him. “No, *Monsieur* Allaire, but I am within my right to take the vacation time owed to me.”

I’ve been back at work for four days, and this is the first time I’ve seen him.

His lips curl. “If you want a career in fashion, you must make sacrifices.”

I clench my teeth and lift my chin. “Yes, *Monsieur* Allaire.”

“You will not get far, if you don’t remember that. Your place is here at your desk.” For one brief second, he holds my gaze, before he swivels on his heel and walks away.

I glare at his back, tempted to stick my tongue at him, but too many people are watching our exchange. As soon as he vanishes through the door, whispers erupt into life around the room.

“He was poking around your workstation while you were away.”

My attention transfers to my co-worker at the desk beside mine. “I have no idea what he’d be looking for. I don’t keep anything important here.”

Grace tucks a strand of her wild red hair behind her ear. “He didn’t look happy at all.”

Was he searching for more of my designs? Things he can steal to claim as his own. He must have been disappointed to find nothing he could use here. I sigh and glance at the blouse on my mannequin, but my thoughts are far away.

There’s been no contact from Eli. No calls, no texts, or voicemails. My mother mentioned he is staying with her in the Hamptons but hasn’t gone into detail.

I’m so fucking confused, and my emotions are a mess. After all his talk about wanting more, I thought I might have heard something from him by now.

I’d promised myself Eli Travers would not become my obsession again, but here I am, unable to stop thinking about him.

“Are you okay?”

I blink and glance at Grace. Her brow is wrinkled, eyes worried.

“Just tired.”

“It’s almost lunch. How about a trip to the café on the corner? We can get out of the building for a while.”

I’m tempted to push her away like I always do, but the walls inside me crack a little. “I like that idea.”

Grace’s eyes widen, and then she smiles. “Just another twenty minutes to go.”

The time drags, taking forever. As soon as it hits one, we are out the door. I catch sight of *Monsieur* Allaire, who gives me a disapproving stare as we pass his office. Ignoring him, I head to the elevator with Grace.

When we step onto the street, the warm L.A. air washes over me, so different from the cold of New York. We move together along the sidewalk until we reach the café and find a table by the window.

“A few of us in the office have noticed Marcel giving you a hard time.” Grace says. “You’re the only person he doesn’t praise.”

I pick up a paper napkin and twist it between my fingers. “He hasn’t liked me from the moment I started working there.”

“You should talk to HR.”

“They won’t do anything.”

“Why not?”

I smile. “I’ve already tried.”

A waitress appears, and I order a grilled cheese sandwich—comfort food for how I feel.

Since coming back from New York, I’ve been restless and unhappy. It’s as though something has changed, but I’m not sure what it is. Maybe I just need to change my job. I’ve heard nothing from the job application for the fashion house in Milan. Maybe I should look elsewhere.

Would moving across the world fix things anyway?

What if where I'm living isn't the problem? Maybe it's just me.

The thought lingers, while Grace chats happily about the designs she'd been working on. But I can't shake my melancholy mood, and by the time we head back to work, I feel like I have a permanent rain cloud over my head. No messages are waiting for me on my phone when I check it—nothing from Miles or my mom.

Silence from Eli.

I try to lose myself in my designs, but my mind wanders, and I make mistakes. I've never been so relieved when the day ends.

"Mademoiselle Gray, where do you think you're going?"

I pause in the process of gathering my things, and I turn toward *Monsieur Allaire*. "Home."

He shakes his head. *"Non, non, I need you to stay late."*

"Why?"

A hush falls over the room, and the other designers around me stop to watch.

"You're behind on your work." He waves his long, elegant fingers at my desk. "You must make up for the time that you have missed. The collection must be ready on time."

"You can't be serious." I stare, hoping it's a joke. "You're telling me now, right on clocking out time. I have plans this evening."

“Of course, I’m serious.”

“Is anyone else being asked to stay?”

“Non, they are all up to date. I need to see your commitment to the line you are working on. If you cannot give it to me, do not bother returning tomorrow.”

Lips parting, all I can do is stare at him. “I *am* committed.”

“*Bien*, then we have no problem.” He arches an eyebrow.

For a second, I wrestle with the urge to argue, but it dims under the need not to disappoint the rest of my team. “No, *Monsieur* Allaire. I’ll stay and finish what I’m working on.”

He nods his head. “I will be back to check up on you. Do not waste time *Mademoiselle* Gray.”

Grace approaches me as soon as he leaves. “Are you going to be okay on your own?”

“I only need to finish the blouse. It shouldn’t take me too long.”

“I could stay and help.”

“I’m not sure Marcel would be happy about that. Besides, all I’m missing is a self-defense class.”

“If you’re sure.” Grace glances at the door and back.

“Go home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

A few of my other colleagues call goodnight as they leave. When I’m finally alone, I sink back in my chair and turn to the half-finished piece of clothing.

It's fine. Everything is fine.

My boss is an asshole. I should be used to dealing with those by now.

CHAPTER 54

ELI

“Eli?”

I straighten from putting the final suitcase into the trunk of the car and turn to face my stepmother, who’s walking down the steps toward me. She has an envelope in her hand and she’s tapping it against her palm.

“Everything okay?” My gaze skims over her face. There’s a slight frown marring her otherwise perfect features.

“What? Oh, yes. I just ...” She bites her lip, and for a second, I see Arabella’s face superimposed on hers. “This letter came for you before Christmas. I opened it.” She holds up a hand when I open my mouth to speak. “I know. I know. I shouldn’t have done it, but ... Well, as soon as I saw the envelope I felt I needed to check what it was. I wasn’t going to tell you about it, but ...” She licks her lips. “The more I thought about it, the more I think it might be a good idea.”

My gaze drops to the envelope, and I hold out my hand. “What is it?”

She hesitates, fingers tightening on the white paper as I reach for it.

“Ellie, give me the envelope.”

She lets it go, her reluctance clear, and I reach inside for the letter. Unfolding it, my eyes lock onto the logo at the top of the

page and I freeze.

“What the fuck?”

I turn the sheet over, then back again, for some reason expecting the image to change. But no, it's still there. A golden shield, with a crown above it and the letters ‘CBA’ inside. Beneath it, there's a Latin quote—*Studeat Discere, Audet Deficere ... Strive to Learn, Dare to Fail*. The words are burned into my brain.

“What is this?” My voice is rough.

“Read it.”

I'm not sure I want to. Just seeing the school's logo has brought me out in a cold sweat.

“Just fucking tell me.”

“They're inviting you back for a ten-year reunion. The school is going to reopen in the Fall, and they would like the last senior year to return to see what they have changed, and I guess, try and convince those of you with kids that it's the place you want to send them.”

“No one should ever go back to that fucking school.”

“I think that's why they've done this. To show that things have changed, that it wasn't the school that was to blame.”

I shake my head. “No fucking chance.”

“Eli—”

I screw up the letter and throw it across the driveway.

“There is no way in fucking hell I’m setting foot in that place again.” I stalk around to the side of the car and throw open the back passenger door. “I’m going to be late for my flight.”

“At least think about it.”

“No.”

“It might be good for you.”

“Going to the place where Kellan died will *not* be fucking good for me, I guarantee it. I’ll call you when I land.” I nod to the driver. “Let’s go.”

“Honey, I’m home.” I toss out the words as I step inside the cabin, my eyes automatically seeking out the crystal raven on the mantelpiece. “Miss me?”

There’s only silence in reply, but I smile anyway and cross the room to run my finger over the bird. “I should take you with me next time I travel, instead of leaving you here.”

Is it stupid that I talk to the ornament like it’s really my friend? Maybe, but it eases something inside me. It’s probably not healthy. I don’t care.

“I brought some more of my shit back from the Hamptons. Found a couple of sketchbooks from when I was a kid. I’ll show them to you once I’m unpacked. Speaking of ... I better go get the cases out of the car.” I go back outside and drag out the cases from my Land Rover. I’d had to leave it parked at the airport while I was in New York, so I had a way of getting

back to the cabin when I returned.

I drag them indoors, drive the car back into the small building I'd erected as a garage, then spend some time making sure the solar panels, generators, and everything else that keeps the cabin in habitable condition is in perfect running order, before going back indoors and lighting the fire.

“Can you believe fucking Churchill Bradley is reopening? *And* they invited our entire senior year to attend some kind of reopening celebration event. Are they fucking insane?”

I drop onto the couch with a heavy sigh. “Who in their right mind would want to go back to that place?” I tip my head back and close my eyes.

Maybe you should go. What's the worst that could happen?

“The worst is already happening. They're talking about reopening the fucking place.”

Is that such a bad idea? The school was ranked as one of the best educational institutions in the country.

“And both of my friends were murdered there.”

It wasn't the school that did it.

“Shut the fuck up. I don't want to hear your logic about this.”

CHAPTER 55

ARABELLA

I unlock my apartment door, and push it open with my shoulder, while juggling the parcel and letters in my other arm. The gym had been busy, so I did my time on the running machine but not as much as I would have liked on the weights before calling it a day and heading home.

I kick the door closed, walk into the living room and dump everything on the coffee table. My gym bag, I leave on the floor. Toeing out of my sneakers, I head for the bathroom. After a quick shower, I pull on a clean pair of yoga pants and Eli's old black hoodie.

I grab the remote and find my usual sitcom on repeat, and collapse onto the couch. The television fills the silence, the noise making me feel less alone. It's been a long week, and my boss has been brutal with his criticism. Not only has he made me work late two nights in a row, but he also added a list of new pieces. I'm surprised he hasn't tried to make me go in over the weekend.

My attention lands on the parcel I dumped on the coffee table, and I reach for it. There is no sender's address, just my own.

Could it be from my mom?

She hasn't mentioned sending anything recently. I rip it open, carefully. There's a plain box inside, and I tug the lid

open. Packaged inside that is a wooden box with the image of a chessboard printed on it.

With a gentle push and pull motion, I get it out and lay it on the coffee table. As I run my fingers over the smooth surface, I find a tiny handle for a drawer underneath. The black and white pieces are nestled inside. I examine each one and place them in their positions on the board. When I'm done, there's a gap. One of the white pieces is missing.

I search the box and the packaging, but there's no sign of the white knight. I check beneath the table to see if it's slipped out but it's not there, either. There's no note or message to say who the chessboard is from.

Eli?

I chew on my lip and eye the gift warily. It's unconventional enough to be something he would send to me.

Is this his way of saying he still wants to play?

I pick up my cell to text him, and then pause. What if it's not from him?

Head full of questions, I put the chess set away, and turn my attention to the rest of the mail. I skim past the few bills, tossing them onto the table. The last envelope is thick, white, and looks expensive. My name and address is typed neatly on the front. I rip it open and pull out the sheet of paper inside. The first thing my gaze lands on is the golden shield, with a crown above it and the letters 'CBA' inside at the top of the letter.

Everything inside me turns to ice. For one full minute, I think my heart stops beating, before it lurches back to life and bangs like a trapped bird behind my ribs. Nausea rolls in my stomach.

This can't be real.

I close my eyes, then open them again, but the crest and the Latin words I don't understand are still there. My gaze falls to the first line.

“Churchill Bradley Academy invites you to a reunion for all those who ... *What the hell?* They can't be serious.” I drop the piece of paper on the floor as though it burns.

Reunion? The school wants us to come back.

I lunge up off the couch in shock and press a hand to my stomach. My hands are tingling, and my vision blurs. The voices on the TV are blocked out by the rushing sound in my ears. Somehow, I make it to the bathroom in time to throw up in the toilet. On my hands and knees, I curl up on the floor and fight to breathe.

It's dark, and I can't get out. The walls won't move. No matter how loud I scream, no one can hear me. He left me here. I'm going to die. I can't get out. I can't ... I can't ...

I'm not sure how long I stay there, caught in the flashback. But when awareness of my surroundings *does* filter back in, I'm shaking and exhausted. My cheeks are wet with tears. I tilt my face down and bury it into the material of the hoodie. Eli's scent has long faded but having a piece of him close to me still

brings me comfort, and I can pretend I can still smell his cologne. The panic attack fades, but the unsettled feelings it leaves remain. I haven't had one this strong in years.

I peel myself off the floor slowly and return to the living room on shaking legs. Unable to bring myself to look at the letter on the floor, I grab my phone off the table instead, and move into the kitchen. I sink into one of the chairs at the table.

With a quick scroll through my contacts, I tap on the number I'm after.

He answers on the fourth ring. "If you're going to ask me out for lunch, I'm available."

I lick my lips. "Miles, did you get a letter?" My voice is shaking.

"A letter?"

"From the academy."

"Bella, what are you talking about?"

I focus on forcing out more words. "They're inviting our senior year back ... for a reunion."

"What are you—".

"Bella, we're coming over." Ivan's voice replaces Miles'. "We'll talk then." He ends the call.

I stare down at my cell.

They're coming over?

My brain is trying to process everything, but it's sluggish

and thoughts are hard to hold onto.

I should do something. Anything.

I look around the kitchen.

I'll make coffee. It'll distract me until they get here.

By the time Miles and Ivan arrive, I'm a little calmer. I usher them into my living room and let them take the couch while I curl up in one of the armchairs. Ivan bends to retrieve the letter from the floor, and places it on the coffee table.

Miles glances at it, and his eyes widen. "Is that the crest for Churchill Bradley Academy?"

I nod. "They want us to come back."

He laughs. "It's a joke, right?"

"A sick one, if it is."

"It's real." Ivan takes a seat beside his fiancé on the couch. "The senior year has been invited back for one week. You get to have the prom you missed. Catch up with classmates."

"Why would we want to go back?"

"To face your past," he tells me softly.

"Ivan?" Miles shifts on the cushions to face his partner. "How do you know about this? Why don't I have a letter?"

"You do. I was waiting for the right time to give it to you."

"You kept it from me?"

Ivan's gaze softens. "I wanted to make sure you could

handle it first.”

“Well, thank you for warning me, I just had a fucking panic attack.” My voice is bitter.

“I’m sorry, Arabella.” He turns his attention back to me. “It was not my intention to trigger you.”

I huddle deeper in my hoodie. “Well, I am not going.”

“I think you should.”

Miles gapes at him. “What? Ivan, are you *crazy*?”

The older man shrugs. “After learning what happened to you both, I think this is something you need to do.”

“You didn’t live through what we did. It left scars on both of us.”

“No, you’re right, I did not. But I know from experience the damage that can be caused by not facing your past. You’ve both been living with your trauma for far too long. You must face your demons. You need to go back. To face those monsters that hide in the dark so you can heal.”

CHAPTER 56

ELI

Back at the cabin, my days return to their usual routine of coffee for breakfast, a run through the forest, working on paintings in my studio, coffee for lunch, then any maintenance that needs doing in the afternoon.

It takes a couple of days, but by the end of the third, I've worn myself out to the point that I'm ready to sleep.

Hopefully with no dreams. No thoughts. Just solid *nothing*.

Which suits me. Because I don't want to fucking think.

All I've done since getting on the plane and coming back is *think*. About the letter. About the school. About Arabella. About Kellan. About the whole fucking mess that was my senior year.

So thinking is not something I want to do any time soon. Because thinking will lead to me analyzing everything that happened. And that will lead to dreams.

I've had a handle on my dreams for the past year or so. Nightmares have become irregular. I don't want to go back to the sleepless nights ... or the waking up screaming ... or the fucking panic attacks when I wake up disoriented and scared that I'm too late to save Ari from suffocating inside Churchill Bradley's coffin.

I cut off that train of thought. If I trap myself in that thought

cycle, I'll never sleep. I throw my arm over my face and close my eyes.

Think happy thoughts.

A wry snort echoes through my head.

"Shut the fuck up." I say the words out loud.

Or what? You'll stop speaking to me? Another snort. *Never gonna happen.*

"Seriously, I don't want to do this right now."

You realize you're talking to yourself, don't you? I'm not really haunting the inside of your head.

"I'm aware."

It's because you're out here, alone. Did you notice how little you spoke to me when you were in New York? You didn't need me there.

"Please shut up."

You should go to the reunion.

I groan and roll onto my side. "I said no."

You can change your mind. I bet Elena didn't throw the letter away. She probably picked it up after you left.

"I have no interest in going back there."

Not even to see me?

"You're not there."

Most of your memories of me are, though. Eli, it could be

good to face it.

I shake my head. “Just let me sleep, Kell.”

The ringtone on my cell drags me out of a fitful sleep and I throw out a hand to grope around the nightstand until I find it and hit connect.

“What?” My voice is a sleep-thickened rasp.

There’s a beat of silence and then a vaguely familiar voice speaks down the line. “Hello? Eli?”

“Who is this?”

“Ivan, Miles’ fiancé.”

That explains how he got my number.

“What can I do for you?” I push up on the bed and rub my free hand down my face.

“I was hoping to talk to you. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“You woke me up. Does that constitute a bad time?”

“Woke you—aren’t you three hours ahead of Los Angeles?”

“I didn’t get to sleep until late. Spit it out, Ivan. What do you want?”

“While you were in New York, did you get a letter from your old school?”

Tension snaps my spine taut. “What if I did?”

“No need to be defensive, dear boy. I’m curious to know if

you're going to go.”

“No, I'm not.”

He sighs. “That's a shame.”

And just like that dread unfurls in my stomach. “Why is it a shame?”

“It's just that when Miles got the letter, I reached out to the board of trustees.”

“Why?” There's a bite to my tone.

“Well, the letter is offering a day event, to show the final senior year before the school closed just how many things have been changed, followed by the prom you never got to have. Their hope is to get your blessing for the school to reopen.”

“They can fuck off.”

“Now, now, Eli. I spoke to the board and suggested that maybe instead of a single day, a week would be better. They can show you all the things they've changed, give everyone a chance to catch up ... maybe slay some personal demons?”

“What the fuck would you know about personal demons?”

“More than you think. Anyway, the plan is for everyone to arrive on the Monday with the prom held on the Friday evening. There will be the opportunity to see the work that has been done on the buildings, meet the new staff, explore your old haunts, and finish off any projects you were working on in senior year.”

My mind flashes to the marble sculpture I'd spent most of my year on.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"What if I told you Miles was going?"

"I'd tell you to tell him from me he's a fucking idiot."

Ivan laughs quietly. "Alright then, what if I told you Bella is going?"

"She's ... *what?* Why the actual fuck would she go back there?"

"For closure, Eli. To realize that the school isn't the monster you've all built it up to be. It's just a building, a place where ... yes, I grant ... bad things happened. But it was a person who committed those things, *not* the actual school itself."

"You sound like—" I snap my teeth closed. Telling Ivan he sounds like Kellan would not be a good idea. It'll raise questions that I don't want to answer.

"Ari is definitely going?" I hate the thought of her back in that place.

"She'll be traveling with me and Miles, yes."

"Fuck." I scrub a hand over my face again. "Who's fucking idea was it to reopen the place?"

"I'm assuming the trustees. Until that unfortunate incident, it had a very good reputation."

"Unfortunate incident." My voice is cold, sharp, *grim*.

“I know that sounds awful, Eli, but for people who weren’t there and didn’t live through it, that’s what it is. It’s been ten years. It’s time to find peace with what you went through.”

I cut the call without replying.

Go back to Churchill Bradley Academy? My heart rate increases at the thought of it and I break out in a cold sweat. I hate the thought of going back there.

But I hate the thought of Arabella being there more.

CHAPTER 57

ARABELLA

Taking a deep breath, I step into *Monsieur* Allaire's office at his call. He's seated behind his polished mahogany desk with sketches and rough drafts strewn over the surface.

He frowns at me. "What do you want?"

I stiffen my spine. "I need to take some time off. It's a personal matter."

"No."

"But—"

His lips press together in a thin white line of disapproval. "You need to finish those other designs for the collection, *Mademoiselle* Gray. There is no time for you to go off and play."

"I've finished most of them. I'm sure Grace can do the rest."

"I did not ask her for them. I asked *you*."

"I need the time off. It's important."

For the millionth time, I wonder how I let Ivan talk me into this. Miles isn't happy about it either, but his fiancé is good at getting what he wants.

We're about to walk back into hell, but at least we're going together. I'm still not sure I'm ready to face those gates and everything inside.

Damn Ivan for being so persuasive.

“*Oui, oui*, it is always important.” He waves a dismissive hand. “You flit off like a butterfly to New York for an art exhibition. Spend Christmas there with friends.”

Marcel’s words catch me off guard and it takes a second for them to register. When they do, tension unfurls inside me. “How do you know what I was doing? I never told anyone in the office where I was going.”

My boss shrugs. “A guess.”

“Have you been *spying* on me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“There’s no way you just guessed that.”

He meets my wary gaze with hard eyes. “You spent time with Ivan Vasiliev.”

“You know Ivan?”

Marcel doesn’t reply.

“I’ll ask him, then.” I reach for my cell.

“Ivan and I used to date.” His admission is thrown out from between clenched teeth.

I’m frozen in place. “You’re his *ex*?”

He glares at me. “*Oui*. And we would be back together if it wasn’t for your little friend.”

“Miles?”

“Ivan was *mine*.”

“Is this why you’ve been shitty with me the whole time I’ve worked here? Because I’m friends with *Miles*? Because he’s engaged to your ex-boyfriend?”

“I said no to the time off, *Mademoiselle* Gray.” He returns to studying the sketches in front of him. “If you have nothing else to say, get back to work. I want those designs on my desk by the end of the day. If not, expect to work well into the night to finish them. I wouldn’t make any more plans for *gallivanting* if I were you.”

The son-of-a-bitch has been on my back this whole time because he can’t take his anger out on my best friend. I’m being made to pay because he’s jealous of Ivan and Miles’ happiness.

Anger swells up inside me. “No.”

Marcel’s chin tilts up, and he glares. “What do you mean *no*?”

“You won’t be getting any more of my work, *Monsieur* Allaire. Forget stealing any more of my ideas. I quit.”

His expression shifts into a scowl. “You *can’t* quit. If you do, I’ll ensure you never work in the fashion industry ever again.”

His words should scare me, but they don’t. If anything, it feels like a weight is lifted off my shoulders.

“Watch me.” I turn and stride toward the door, then stop.

“I’ll make sure Ivan knows about this, just in case you’re spying on him, too. I’m sure he’ll be interested to know all about it.”

“*Mademoiselle Gray*—”

“Fuck you, *Monsieur Allaire*.” I walk past his secretary, who’s gaping at me. “Goodbye.”

My fingers tighten around the hand holding mine as the imposing gates of Churchill Bradley Academy come into view. I’m trying really hard not to crumble under the tension. My chest is tight, panic a jagged lump in my throat.

It’s been five days since I quit my job. After walking out, I called Ivan and told him what happened. He apologized for his ex’s behavior and promised to help me find a new job.

I’ve spent the entire time, arguing with myself, changing my mind back and forth about coming here. I’m still not sure how Ivan got me in the car.

“We’re here,” Miles squeezes my hand.

Ivan darts us a look in the rear-view mirror before returning his attention to the road. “Everything okay back there?”

I give him a weak smile. “Would you turn around if I said no?”

“You’ll be fine. We’ll take it slowly.”

“It’s just a few days.” I’m not sure if Miles is trying to

convince me or himself.

“A week,” I correct him.

Ivan stops at the gates and shows the security guard our invitations before driving us through. “You’ll get to see all your old classmates.”

Miles casts an uneasy glance at the building looming directly ahead of us. “That’s not necessarily a good thing.”

“The jocks and cheerleaders bullied me.” My voice is small, and I can’t shake the feeling of dread that wraps itself around me tightly.

“Then fuck what any of them think. You are here to get closure on the past.”

“I hope you’re prepared to pay for all the therapy sessions we’ll need by the time we leave.” My attention roams over the grass toward the dorm building, and I huddle deeper into the hoodie I’m wearing.

It’s my shield against the memories scratching to get out.

Memories of my excitement as I headed into the woods to meet Sin to play. My fear of Eli as he tormented me. The pain of hitting rock bottom when I wanted to die and the sheer anguish when Kellan died.

I release a shaky breath, emotions hitting me all at once, and blink as tears fill my eyes. I can’t stop them from spilling free and down my cheeks.

Miles’ arms engulf me, and he pulls me into his side. “I

know, I know.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

His voice is thick. “We’ll do it together.”

I hug him. “It hurts just to be back here.”

“Same.” He admits. “I almost expect to see Kellan walking across the campus.”

My chest aches, memories race to the surface, and I’m not sure I’m ready to face them at all.

CHAPTER 58

ELI

The closer I get to Churchill Bradley Academy, the slower I drive, until I'm moving along at such a crawl that if I don't put my foot down, I won't get there before midnight.

When the gates finally come into view, I slam on my brakes and just stare at them. They're still quite a distance away, close enough for me to see the security post but far enough for me not to be able to make out the features of the men waiting there.

I can't do this.

I reverse down the road, then stop again.

I have to do this.

I put the car back into drive and hit the gas. The closer I get to the gates, the faster my heart beats against my ribs. My hand is shaking when I slide down the window and show the guard my invitation.

"Welcome back, Mr. Travers. Go straight through. I'm sure you remember where to park."

"Thanks."

I'm on autopilot as I drive through the gates. A left turn puts the dorm buildings on my right and the grass leading to the woods and the cemetery on my left. Directly ahead is the parking lot. I keep my eyes focused on the road; my knuckles

white from the grip I have on the steering wheel.

I pull into a space and cut off the engine. I'm not really paying much attention to my surroundings when I climb out of the car. So, when the door hits something, the thud surprises me. I switch my gaze from my car to what I hit and everything around me fades into darkness.

The car in the parking space beside mine has been there for a while. The paint is faded, the body covered with clear signs of weather damage. Grass and weeds are growing on it. I rest a hand against the hood as memories overwhelm me.

You can drive. I've parked miles away.

You're parked right next to me.

Okay, fine. I just don't want to drive.

"Fuck." I sway and sink to my knees. Leaning forward, I rest my head on the grill and close my eyes.

You've got this. Get up and go into the cafeteria. That's where the invitation said to go when you arrive.

I suck in a breath.

"I can't do this, Kell." My voice is a broken whisper.

Don't be ridiculous. Of the two of us, it's me who can't do it. No physical body, you see. Hard to socialize when no one can see you.

A choked laugh escapes me.

I love you, Eli, but it's conditional. If you're going to sit out

here in the dark crying on the hood of my car all night, I'm going to have to reevaluate whose head I'm haunting. I might have to hop over to Arabella's, instead.

“You're not even fucking in my head. I'm just imagining what you might say to me.”

It counts. You know it's what I'd say if I was there.

“If you were here, this wouldn't be such a fucking problem, you idiot.”

Stop swearing at me. Get up, wipe your eyes, and remind the assholes inside who you are.

Wipe my eyes? I lift a hand. My fingers come away from my face wet.

Suck it up, buttercup. Admit it. You love me. You miss me.

“You already know I miss you.”

Then get your ass inside, unpack, then come and visit me in the cemetery.

“You're not fucking here.”

As good as. Stop the fucking pity party, get up and walk in there. You owned the hallways of Churchill Bradley. Remind them!

I suck in a shuddering breath and nod. “You're right.”

Sniffing, I shove to my feet and move back around to the driver's side of my car. I lean in and grab my jacket from the back seat. Once I've locked the car, I walk across the parking

lot to the path.

As I walk, I see flashes of memories around me.

Sitting with Kellan on the low crumbling wall while he torments Miles. Standing in the middle of the path, watching as Arabella comes toward me.

My hand rests on the door to the cafeteria, and I stand there for a moment, taking breath after breath until my heartbeat slows down. I slide my palm down to grip the handle and twist it, then push the door open.

Noise inside reaches me—voices talking, laughter, the clink of glasses. I stop in the doorway and sweep my gaze over the room.

All the tables are in the same positions. The bright overhead lights shine off the gleaming surfaces. I step inside, my eyes on the table I used to share with Kellan and, as I walk through, silence falls behind me.

I toss my jacket onto the table and take my seat ... the seat I'd taken every year until senior year, with my back to the room.

And then a shadow falls over me. I turn my head slowly, gaze lifting to focus on the man hovering there.

I don't know why there's a stab of pain in my chest when I see ginger hair instead of brown.

"Eli." He smiles at me. "You look well."

I force myself to return his smile. "Garrett."

CHAPTER 59

ARABELLA

This feels so unreal.

I'm sitting in the cafeteria of Churchill Bradley Academy, surrounded by faces I know, but they all look older. The jocks and cheerleaders have gravitated to their old table. Brad's blonde hair has thinned, and he's lost his athletic physique. I'm surprised to see Lacy with him. She looks worn at the edges, no longer as slender as she'd once been.

Miles is talking to Bret, and my gaze settles on the white band around the other man's neck. A priest. One of my tormentors joined the church. I wonder if his choice came from all the events that happened here.

"Do you want to go and mingle?" Ivan asks.

I shake my head. "The only friends I have here are you and Miles. You don't have to stay with me."

"Garrett is here, and I disagree. Miles said this would hit you harder than him."

My best friend knows me so well, but it doesn't mean his fiancé does. Ivan is an outsider. He wasn't here all those years ago. How can he understand what we went through?

"I never fitted in here. From the first second I stepped into this place, it was nothing but a nightmare."

What chance was I given? Evan set his game in motion long

before I'd stepped through these doors. I'd become one of his pawns, caught up in lies and manipulation. A game none of us knew we were playing until it was too late.

I scan the faces of the chatting people. A few have glanced my way, but so far, no one has come over. They were all here for years, long before I arrived. These walls hold happy memories for most of them. I can count on one hand how many pleasant recollections of this school I have.

My focus turns inward, thoughts filled with the first moment I'd seen my Eli in the cafeteria.

He stands in the doorway dressed all in black. A beautiful dark angel with messy hair, tattoos, and piercings. Earbuds in, he ignored the world around him and fiddled with his phone. And then his head lifted, and those striking green eyes locked onto mine with hate I had come to know intimately.

“Do I scare you, Princess?”

A shiver wracks my body. It's been ten fucking years, but it feels as though I never left this place.

An empty table catches my eye. Everyone is skirting around it, avoiding it, and in my head, I see two boys staring back at me. Kellan, the humor glittering in his gray eyes a stark contrast to the stormy expression Eli wears.

Get your shit together, Gray. You have to stay focused on the here and now and not ghosts from the past. Don't let them sink their claws into you too deep.

“Arabella?”

The voice snaps me out of my thoughts. “Bret.”

He gives me a tentative smile. “Hi. It’s good to see you.”

I try to summon up some enthusiasm, forcing a smile. “It’s ... good to see you too.”

“You don’t have to pretend to be happy to see me.”

“No. No, I am.”

“I just wanted to apologize for everything I put you through back when we were eighteen.” His tone is sincere. “The things I did and said. How I teased you. It was wrong and hurtful. Our actions can leave scars on others. It took me a while to figure that out.”

My hand trembles as I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Are you asking for my forgiveness?”

Bret shakes his head. “No. I just wanted to say I was sorry.”

“Okay.” I breathe the one word out.

Can I forgive him and the others for what they put me through?

If I’m honest with myself, I don’t think I can ever forgive any of them.

Bret gives me one last smile, then walks away to join another group. Shoulders hunched, I wrap one arm around my middle, feeling like an island in the middle of the ocean. All the old feelings of loneliness resurface.

Why did I let Ivan talk me into coming for the week?

His hand covers mine on the table. “Breathe, Bella. Talk to me.”

“And tell you what?” I turn my head to meet his watchful stare. “That all I see around me are bad memories and ghosts?”

“The rest of your year have moved on with their lives. Why don’t you talk to them with Miles?”

“They weren’t....” I push out a breath, everything within me tight with tension. “They weren’t as close to what happened as Miles and I was. They didn’t see what we saw.”

“You aren’t alone.” He squeezes my fingers. “We are with you this time.”

As much as that should give me comfort, it doesn’t. “I need some air.”

I don’t wait for him to reply. Pushing back my seat, I keep to the wall, and edge around the cafeteria to pass the crowds of chatting people. Head down, I keep my arms around my waist. Silence washes over the room, but I don’t search for the cause.

Memories crash over me, threatening to choke me. I don’t stop moving until fresh air hits my face, and I suck it in as I walk. The images in my head continue to batter me.

Jace kissing me.

Eli’s cruel words.

Lacy bullying me.

My panic when I was chased through the woods.

They crowd my head, swirling together in a mess. I can't stop them, no matter how much I try.

I stop on the grass, lift my chin and stare at the trees. The path that leads toward the cemetery is ahead of me.

Red or green, Kitten?

Sin.

Closing my eyes at the husky voice whispering through my thoughts, I draw a deep breath. I'm not eighteen anymore. Not a naïve child. I have to cling to the here and now. I can't let myself drown in the past. It's already threatening to suck me down into an undertow of darkness.

I straighten my shoulders, and swivel on my heels.

No running away. Not this time.

CHAPTER 60

ELI

“I hoped you would come.” Garrett slips onto the seat opposite me, and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from telling him to get out of Kellan’s seat. “I heard you moved out of the Hamptons a few years ago. I did a similar thing. Went to work at my dad’s company in Silicon Valley. He insisted I start at the bottom and work my way up. How about you? Did you follow your dad into finance?”

I shake my head. “He died five years ago. He sold off the company a couple of years prior to that, with my blessing, due to ill health.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Have you spoken to Arabella yet?”

“She’s here? I haven’t seen her.”

“I saw Miles a few minutes ago, and I know she arrived with him, so she’s here somewhere.” He looks around the room. “Can’t see her, though. Maybe she slipped out.”

Did she see me and leave?

I hadn’t replied to the drunken texts and photographs she sent. I thought once she was sober she’d be embarrassed, maybe try to apologize. When she didn’t, I decided it was best not to mention them, just in case she wanted to forget it and move on.

Before I can question Garrett further, there's the sound of silverware hitting glass.

“Everyone, can I have your attention for a moment?” The familiar voice of Principal Warren rings out and everyone in the room falls silent. “First of all, I'd like to thank you all for coming. We know that your senior year with us ended abruptly in a way no teenager should ever have to experience, so we truly do appreciate the fact you've come to join us.

“Over the next few days, we would like to give you all the opportunity to maybe get some closure over the events which, I'm sure, have left a lot of you with emotions that were hard to deal with at the time. We also hope that it gives you all a chance to catch up and remember the good times you had here at Churchill Bradley. Those of you who were mid-project when we closed the doors will, if you wish, be able to finish them and take them home with you as a positive memory of your time here.”

I wonder if my sculpture is still in the room I'd been using. If nothing else, maybe coming here will give me a chance to finish it.

“We thought it would be fun for everyone to treat this week as though it's your final week of school. All your dorm rooms have been cleaned and prepared for you to stay in. I have keys here ready to issue out to everyone, and you have all been assigned the same rooms you used while you were residents here. During the clean-up process, we discovered a lot of

personal belongings, so each room has a box or two full of items that may have been left by you. Feel free to go through them and keep or discard anything, as you see fit.

“The rest of this evening is your own to walk around, catch up and acclimate to being back within our walls again. Tomorrow, we have a talk and formal walk around planned, where we can show you what has changed and talk about how we hope to encourage parents of students to send their children back to our prestigious school once more. The cafeteria will be open from eight am until ten pm every day. All staff have returned and hope to spend time catching up with you all. On Friday evening, we have a prom planned, which we hope you will all take part in organizing, as you once did when you were students here.” He smiles around the room. “I cannot express my delight at seeing so many of you. Thank you for coming back and giving us this chance to give *you* the final senior week you should have had.

“Mr. McIntyre and Coach Braun are by the doors with your dorm keys. If you could make an orderly line, we’ll get those distributed and then you can spend the rest of the evening relaxing.”

I snort.

Relaxing. How the fuck am I supposed to relax when I’m sitting in the place where two of my best friends were murdered? Where I tormented a girl by day and worshiped her body at night? Where I was viewed as a monster and allowed a

psychopath to turn me into one.

Why the fuck did I come here?

I shove to my feet, my intention to walk out, but there are too many people milling around by the doors, all laughing and chattering as they wait to get the keys to the rooms they'd spent so many years living in.

*Am I the only one who doesn't want to fucking take that key?
Am I the only one who remembers what fucking happened here?*

One look at all the happy, smiling faces makes me think I am. But then I catch sight of pale features, and green eyes a shade lighter than mine.

Miles inclines his head and comes toward me, his pace slow. I don't move, don't look away, and when he reaches me and hooks an arm around my neck to pull me into a rough hug, I don't stop him.

"This is so weird," he whispers close to my ear. "I keep waiting for Kellan to say something sarcastic."

"Me too."

We part, almost reluctantly.

"I'm not sure how I feel about sleeping in the dorm rooms, although I should have realized that's what they would do." His confession is uttered in a low voice.

I suck in a deep breath. "Kellan's car is still in the parking lot." I'm sure the anguish in his eyes is reflected in mine. "I'm

not sure I want to see what's in our old room.”

“I can come with you, if you like?”

I'm shaking my head before he finishes speaking. “No. I think it's best I do it alone.” I don't want anyone to witness the potential breakdown I'm going to have. I fucking cried when I saw his car, fuck only knows what I'm going to do when I walk into that fucking room again.

CHAPTER 61

ARABELLA

“Did you know Eli is here?” Miles’ eyes meet mine as we walk across the grass.

My heart jolts in my chest at the news. “He is?”

“I saw him earlier. He ... he looked as shell-shocked as you do to be back.”

“I didn’t know he was coming.” Half turning, I peer back at the crowd leaving the cafeteria but see no sign of him. “I thought this was the last place he would ever want to visit.”

“Same could be said for us,” my best friend reminds me.

Yet here we are.

Ivan curls his strong arm around his fiancé’s waist, his other hand resting on the small of my back. “Come on, let’s see the rooms before we get the cases from the car.”

With one last lingering look for Eli, I move toward the dorm building with them.

Eli is here? Why? The thought circles in my head. What do I say if I bump into him? It’s been weeks since the drunken texts.

I don’t think he’ll be in the mood to talk. This is the place his two best friends died.

That hikes up my anxiety levels.

Here I am, worrying about a few stupid messages when he'll be reliving some of the worst moments in his life. Ones that ripped his heart apart. I can't even begin to imagine how he feels. I have Miles and Ivan to lean on. He's here on his own, with no support. Guilt swirls through me and I dart another look over my shoulder but see no sign of him.

People walk past us, chatting and laughing. A part of me wishes I had what they do—happiness at reconnecting after so many years.

When we reach the building everyone is flowing into, I tug up the hood of my hoodie.

Ivan ushers us inside the foyer. "Which floor?"

"We're on the next one. Bella is above us," Miles tells him. "The stairs are that way."

I give him a tight smile. "I haven't forgotten the way."

"We're still coming up with you."

I don't argue.

We make our way to the stairs and then up to the senior girls' floor.

I'm holding the metal key in my hand so tightly that my knuckles are white. My mouth is dry, and no matter how much I swallow, it doesn't seem to help. Step by slow step, I make my way along the hallway, Ivan and Miles on either side of me. My gaze slides over each door, and I read the numbers in my head. When I reach my dorm room, I turn slowly and stare

at the smooth wood.

How many tears did I shed behind it? How much pain did I suffer in my brief time here?

“Do you want us to come in with you?” Miles’ voice is soft and hesitant.

I shake my head. “I have to face my demons eventually, right? That starts here.”

“We’re downstairs if you need us. You remember where my room is, right?”

“I remember everything.”

Arms slide around me from behind, hugging me, and Miles rests his chin on my shoulder. “As much as I keep telling myself this place is different, it doesn’t feel like it.”

I clutch the arms around my waist in reassurance. “I know.”

His embrace tightens for a second before he lets me go.

Ivan touches my shoulder gently. “We’ll be back in fifteen minutes, and then we’ll bring the bags up.”

I pat his hand. “Okay, thank you.”

I unlock the door and push it open, but I wait until the two men walk away before I move.

My stomach twists.

Move Gray. You have to go in.

I pull the key out of the lock and step inside. There’s no

dead animal waiting for me on the mattress. No monster looming in the shadows.

The walls have been painted, but other than that, there's little change to the space's interior. Two beds are on either side of the room, neatly made. Two dressers, a table with three chairs. I always found that odd. Why three chairs? Were we only supposed to have one friend visit at a time?

I almost expect to see my photos and sketches on the wall on my side, but they aren't there.

Exhaling slowly, I walk to the closet and open it. It's empty, stripped bare of everything inside. Through the only other door in the room is the bathroom. All the fixtures are new in there. A different colored bathroom suite to the one that had been there when I'd been a student. I turn in a slow circle, and spy two big cardboard boxes in a corner. My name and the number of my dorm room are written on the side.

What did I leave here?

After finding Kellan dead and Eli broken, the rest of that day is a blur. I recall my mom helped me pack some clothes, but I can't remember what else. I toy with the sleeve of my hoodie and step toward them.

I peel the clear tape off the top of the first box. Pushing the sides open, I pull out some cloth. One of the black goth tops I'd purchased when I'd decided to rebel against all the bullshit in my life. It reminds me of the time Eli took me to get my butterfly tattoo, then to the beach to smoke a joint.

Have you ever been eaten out by someone with a tongue piercing, Hellcat?

I squirm, remembering how I'd teased him. He'd taken me to a hotel and fucked me for hours.

You're so wet. I bet my dick could slide right in without any foreplay at all. Is your clit aching? Does it need to be touched?

A good memory entwined with so many bad ones. A glimmer of light in the dark.

I put the top on the floor and reach for the next item. My hand closes around something solid, and I lift my old jewelry box free. It's one of the few things that I took with me from my old house before we moved to the Hamptons. I open the lid, my attention sweeping over the jewelry inside, and stop on a bracelet.

My friendship bracelet. I pick it up, and twist the colored band between my fingers, the three charms gleaming in the light. A butterfly, four-leaf clover, and a tiny heart. Amanda had made this for me. My best friend before my mom had remarried Eli's dad.

How long has it been since I thought about her?

Where are you now, Amanda?

We lost contact during my year here. I didn't bother to reach out to her when it was clear she had no interest in staying in my life.

The jewelry box goes on the floor. Another quick rummage and some old postcards join it. There are a couple of notebooks, pens, hair ties, and more pieces of stray clothing. Right at the bottom of the box, I find a blindfold. My heart leaps into my throat.

Sin.

Even when things were fucked up, Sin had been the one good thing here. He kept me sane. Gave me pleasure and made me brave. A secret in the dark, which I'd reveled in night after night.

My nemesis and my savior.

CHAPTER 62

ELI

The second the door swings open, my gaze goes to the bed on the right of the room. The sheets are pulled back, folded neatly halfway down the mattress. Of course, no one is there. I didn't really expect there to be, and yet there's still a hollow sense of disappointment in the pit of my stomach.

My steps are heavy as I walk inside and let the door close behind me. It feels like a prison door clanging shut, locking me inside, and trapping me with memories that weigh me down. The back of my eyes burn and there's a throbbing in my temple. I ignore it all and switch my attention to the bed on the left. The one I'd always used. They're both still queen-sized, but I can see both the base and mattress have been replaced. They used to be plain wooden frames, but these are metal with black headboards. The mattresses seem thicker, raising the height of the bed. I turn and sit on the edge of it and focus on the rest of the room.

There's a small table with three chairs, two dressers and a double closet. One of the doors is open and there are two boxes, one stacked on top of the other. I'm not ready to open them yet. I'm not sure I ever will be. Pushing to my feet, I walk into the bathroom. Everything inside is new and shining. A walk-in shower, a separate bathtub, chrome and white marble. No expense spared.

My lips twist.

Money has never been a problem at Churchill Bradley. It was used to hide the horrors that went on, ignored by staff and students alike ... until it couldn't be hidden any longer.

I press the heel of my hand against my forehead and close my eyes.

Pull yourself together. Open the boxes. Let's see what shit we thought was important to our eighteen-year-old selves.

“I don't want to.”

Don't be a pussy, Eli. It's just stuff.

I feel like an old man when I cross to the closet. The door swings wide on silent hinges and I pick up the top box.

My name is written across the top in black marker. I tear off the packing tape and fold back the flaps.

Three hoodies are folded at the top. I take them out, one by one, and toss them on the bed. Beneath them are sketchbooks, art supplies, school textbooks and a framed photograph of me and Kellan. I take it out and stare at it.

We're laughing toward the camera, arms across each other's shoulders, sitting on the hood of his car. It's not obvious from the shot, but we're parked up on the beach.

I close my eyes, my heart faltering, leaving only pain in my chest.

“I miss you, Kell. Even after all this time.”

Your favorite hoodie isn't here.

I frown down at the box. He's ... *I'm* ... right. I was sure it had been left here when we were taken home. I *lived* in that hoodie. Until Arabella covered it in paint, anyway.

“What the fuck?”

“I'm sorry I tripped.”

“Bullshit. You did that on purpose. This is my favorite hoodie. You fucking spiteful bitch.”

The scene plays out in my head. The way she'd looked so fucking scared. It was before we realized what was going on and I thought she really was trying to piss me off.

Now open the other box.

My eyes snap to it.

I can't open it.

Fuck that shit. Just open the fucking thing.

My hand hovers over the top. I take a deep breath then carefully peel away the tape.

There isn't a fucking snake in there, coiled and waiting to bite you.

Being bitten by a snake would be less painful.

I fold the top back and look inside. A camera, cell phone, laptop and another photograph of us. This time, Zoey is in the center, her arms around both of us, and we're all staring at the camera unsmiling.

I laugh quietly, remembering that day. We'd all tried to outdo each other on how mean we could look. Kellan had set a timer on his camera to take the photographs. There was an entire series of them, but this one was Zoey's favorite. My gaze moves to the camera. The rest are probably on that. I couldn't remember Kellan picking up the camera again after Zoey died.

I bow my head, swallowing against the lump in my throat. I should just leave. Get out of here. I shouldn't have let Ivan convince me to come here. Arabella will be fine without me. There are no monsters here, only ghosts. She has him and Miles to look after her.

I push a hand into my pocket and curl my fingers around my keys. I haven't unpacked. I could slip away now and be back at the cabin before sunrise.

Standing, I move to the door and step out into the hallway. As I walk along it, I can hear laughter and muted talking from the other rooms, but I don't see anyone, and I hit the stairs and hurry down them.

The main foyer is empty, and I stride along it, my plan to get out as fast as possible before someone sees me. Pushing open the door I step outside and set off down the path. I turn the corner just as someone is coming from the opposite direction and they crash into me, bounce off my chest with a soft yelp of surprise and lose their balance.

I automatically reach out to grasp their arm before they land

and tug them back upright.

“I’m sorry,” I begin, then stop when my eyes collide with blue ones.

“Eli.” My name is a whisper on the night air.

I stare at her.

It’s a shame you can’t go back and have a fresh start. That first meeting for you both set the tone for your entire relationship.

Elena’s words from a few short weeks ago echo through my mind.

I drop my gaze to where my hand is curled around her forearm, then lift again to meet hers. Slowly, I slide my hand down and take hers, lifting it to my lips.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” I say softly. “My name is Eli. Eli Travers.”

CHAPTER 63

ARABELLA

Eli's lips brush over my knuckles, and I shiver at the contact. My cheeks heat, my brain stalls.

Why is he the only man in the world who can make me blush this way?

Confusion holds me still while my heart does a little flip-flop in my chest. This is not how I pictured bumping into him again. He's lost weight since I saw him in New York. His cheekbones are sharper and there are dark circles around his eyes.

Has he been sleeping?

My mind swims with concern for him, pushing aside all my worries.

His eyes skim over my face, and it takes me a second to realize he's waiting for me to reply.

Is this a new game or a distraction from being in the worst place possible?

"Hi," My lips quirk. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Arabella, Arabella Gray."

A faint smile appears on his lips. "I know we've only just met, but I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me?"

“In the cafeteria?”

Eli releases my hand. “I would offer to take you further, but as we’re both stuck here on campus, it’s the best I can do.”

I lift an eyebrow in amusement. “What are you doing?”

“Asking you out to dinner.”

“You know what I mean.”

He cocks his head. “I want to get to know you.”

A nervous laugh trickles from my lips. “You already know me.”

“No, I don’t. Not the way I should.” His gaze sharpens. “Wait. Is that my *hoodie*?”

“What?” I glance down at myself. *Oh crap.*

His fingers tug at the front of it. “It is! The one you ruined in art class.”

“I got the paint out.” My tone is defensive. “I thought we were supposed to have just met. So that technically makes it mine and not yours.”

“You had it all this time?”

“I ... I took it with me when we left the school.”

He stares at me. “Why?”

Instead of answering his question, I pout. “Does this mean you want it back?”

Eli studies me for a long moment. “Yes, or no?”

I blink. “What?”

“Dinner.”

“Eli—”

He sighs, and I can *hear* bone-jarring tiredness in the sound. He steps away. “Forget it, then.”

“No! Wait,” I grab his arm as he passes me, fingers digging into the material of his long-sleeved top. “Yes, Eli Travers, I would love to have dinner with you.”

He reaches for my hand, untangles my grip, and threads his fingers through mine. Without another word, he walks away from the dorm building, taking me with him. I glance down at our joined hands. It feels solid and safe ... *right*.

Is it weird that holding hands feels like the most natural thing in the world? I never got to fall out of love with him. In the end, I just had to move on when I’d walked away, and I hadn’t even been able to do that properly.

The cafeteria is busy when we enter, and the people at the tables grow quiet, their gazes turning our way. I ignore their stares and keep all my focus on the man whose grip on my hand has tightened until it hurts. I squeeze back and hope it’s enough to give him the reassurance he seems to need.

We weave our way past the tables, and it takes me a second to realize that he’s leading me toward the one that had always been his. When we reach it, Eli pulls out a chair.

“I’m not sure what they’re serving.”

Why does he sound so nervous?

I'd seen the information pack on the desk in my room with a printed menu for the entire week. Had he been too distracted with memories to notice his own?

"Whatever they have is good." I smile.

"Be right back." He hovers beside the table, unmoving, tension a palpable force around him, then vents a low laugh "I'm not used to doing this." He spins away and joins the line before I can respond.

My heart aches. The one thing I remember with vivid clarity is Kellan always fetched Eli's meals. They'd been joined at the hips. Wherever one was, the other wasn't far behind. Tearing my attention away from him, I scan the other faces in the cafeteria.

A few others have joined Brad and Lacy's entourage since I was last in here. Tina is pale and thinner, her eyes darting from person to person. Beside her, Linda is dressed all in black and is talking to a much older looking Jace. He glances my way a few times, but I don't make eye contact.

Garrett gives me a wave but remains where he is. I raise my hand in greeting and promise myself to talk to him when I get a moment tomorrow. He'd been a good friend in the aftermath of what happened, and I'd been sad when we'd lost contact after I moved away from the Hamptons.

Eli reappears, carrying a tray, and places it on the table. "They had mac and cheese. I seem to recall you eating that."

I take my silverware and the plate of pasta covered in its cheesy sauce. “It’s perfect.”

He takes the seat beside me and takes the other plate. Scooping up some of the pasta, he pops it into his mouth and chews. His jaw is tight, and I can almost sense the restlessness rolling off him.

He hates being here, it’s clear. Mealtime in the cafeteria must bring back many memories.

He told me at the cabin that he has nightmares. Will being here now trigger more?

Will we both have them tonight since we’re back close to the source of our trauma and sorrow?

We eat in silence for a few minutes.

“I’d like to spend the week with you, Arabella Gray.”

My throat tightens into a knot. “You would?”

He nods.

“I don’t understand. If this is about those texts and photos I sent in New York, you know how drunk I was—”

“No,” He reaches for one of the drinks on the tray. “Don’t overthink it. Forget what happened. Let’s just start from the beginning. A fresh slate. I’m a boy who’s just met a girl who he’d really like to spend time with.”

My lips part at his words.

Is that even possible? How can we wipe away all the

memories that link us?

What happened broke us in different ways. He hurt me. I hurt him. We hated each other. We loved each other. We lost each other.

But what if we could go back?

Why can't we take back those moments? I never got to argue with him about pizza toppings the first time around or find out the name of his favorite movie. We never had the chance to do what normal couples do.

Why can't we pretend we're eighteen again?

I pick up my fork and poke at my pasta. "You're kind of cute. I guess I could hang out with you."

The tension in his shoulders relaxes just a fraction, and he tilts his head. "Cute, huh? I think you're hot as fuck."

"Are you flirting with me, Mr. Travers?"

Miles interrupts us before he can answer, shattering the moment. "Hey, guys, can we join you?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, dropping into the seat beside me. Ivan places the tray he's carrying on the table and pulls out the chair opposite Eli.

"Not that seat." Eli's head snaps in his direction, voice sharp.

Ivan stills. "Why not?"

"It belongs to someone else," I tell him. "Kellan."

A look of understanding flashes across Ivan's face, and he moves to the next chair along. "Forgive me. I didn't know."

"Thanks." Eli's eyes burn into mine, bright with pain.

Seeing the anguish in his gaze is like a spear to my heart. "Kellan might not be with us physically, but he's still with us for the last week of school. No one else gets to sit in his place, okay?"

Something shifts between us, the lighter mood evaporating.

He swallows hard. "I think I need some air. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Good night, Arabella."

My stomach drops and a sense of loss washes over me. Before I can stop him, he pushes back his chair and stalks from the room.

The demons he keeps buried are coming out to play. The look on his face as he walks away. It's one I've seen a million times before in the mirror when my own have haunted me.

"Sorry, Bella," Miles' voice is filled with regret. "I just assumed we could sit with you."

"Eli has his own triggers, just as we do."

"Kellan." Ivan says.

I nod. "This week is going to be hard for all of us."

Torture in more ways than one.

An idea takes shape in my head. Maybe I'm crazy, and he won't accept, but I know it's one way to distract him from his

pain. The need to help Eli burrows deep inside my chest. Maybe it would also bring closure. I shy away from what happened the last time I convinced myself that's what I wanted. This is different. This isn't closure from our relationship. Eli was right about that. What happened in the cabin wasn't about closure at all. But this? This could be just what both of us need.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and find his number. My fingers hover over the screen as I think back. Once I have the words formed in my mind, I type them, tweaking them slightly to make them work.

Me: Leave your dorm at midnight, dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt. Jog to the bench and face the trees before removing your t-shirt. Once completed, leave the t-shirt on the bench. Red or green?

CHAPTER 64

ELI

I stop walking and stand in the middle of the path staring down at the text.

What the fuck?

Me: Did you mean to send that to me?

My heart is pounding against my ribs while I wait for her reply.

Ari: Who else would I send it to? Red or green, my Nasty Little Monster?

The rapid beat of my heart slows, and something stirs in my chest, a warmth that heats my blood.

Me: Oh, definitely green, Hellcat. Am I leaving my shirt on the bench and walking away?

Ari: No. You'll receive further instructions when you're there.

A smile tugs up one side of my mouth.

Me: Understood.

I ask my cell the time. The recorded voice replies, telling me it's eight fifty-one pm.

"Set an alarm for eleven forty-five," I instruct it, as I walk into the dorm building.

I have no idea what Arabella is thinking or why she's picked now to send out a challenge so similar to the one I sent her all those years ago, but I'm not going to ignore it.

Maybe she just wants to torment me with reminders of the things I did to her when we were kids here. Maybe it's her way of punishing me for whatever she's decided I need punishing for or maybe ... maybe it's her way of reaching out.

I unlock the door to my room and walk inside. For the first time since arriving, a heavy weight isn't pressing down on me. I feel almost light as I grab a towel, toiletries and go into the bathroom to take a shower.

The light from the moon makes the path to the bench visible enough to not need a flashlight. As I jog toward it, I'm taken back to that night a little over ten years ago. Arabella was fucking insane for meeting me, *a stranger*, out here and trusting I wouldn't hurt her. I make a mental note to ask what she was thinking, *why* she would do something so incredibly stupid, and laugh quietly at the anger I feel for how eighteen-year-old me treated her.

If I ever have a son, I'll kill them for treating a girl the way I treated her. I was raised better than that, and so will any child of mine.

The bench comes into view, and I slow to a walk. There's a small black box sitting in the center, and as I come to a stop, my cell chimes with an incoming message.

Ari: Take off your shirt and face the trees for thirty seconds. I'll text you when the time is up.

I don't reply, just place my cell on the bench and reach back to pull the shirt over my head and drop it beside the box. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I grit my teeth against the cold and face the trees.

I can see my breath in the air in front of my face, and a wry smile pulls up my lips. It hadn't been much warmer when I played these games with her, and she never complained so nor would I.

A twig snaps nearby. So, she *is* here somewhere.

I wonder if she's found the same hiding place I used to use. It gives a perfect vantage point of the bench, while leaving the viewer invisible.

A quiet ding tells me thirty seconds are up. I turn and scoop up my cell.

Ari: Leave your shirt off and open the box. Instructions are inside.

I set down my cell, pick up the box and pop off the lid. A laugh escapes me when I discover the blindfold inside, and a folded piece of paper. I take both out.

Put on the blindfold and face the trees. Red or green. Say your choice out loud.

"Green."

I reach back to tie the blindfold in place and wait. All I can hear is my heart thrumming in my ears, the soft sound of my breathing. My heartbeat picks up.

Was this how she felt, standing here, blind in the dark? Waiting for someone to speak, to approach.

Something warm touches my ribs, and I can't hold back a flinch. Another touch close to my nipple. *Lips*, warm and soft.

What if it's not Arabella? The thought slams into my brain.

“Ari?”

The lips gliding over my chest lift away. “Ari isn't here tonight.”

Hearing her voice is enough to release the tension holding my muscles taut.

“Then what should I call you?”

Her lips return to my chest, pressing soft butterfly kisses to my skin. “You can call me Hellcat.”

CHAPTER 65

ARABELLA

I focus on the man in front of me and not the fact that the cemetery is only a few yards away. Is the tomb locked up? My stomach is a knot of nerves being so close to a place that haunts my nightmares. As much as I know that I'll have to confront the trauma there, I'm not ready to face it just yet.

This isn't about me tonight. It's about Eli.

The shaft of moonlight he's standing in turns his tanned skin pale in the silvery light. He shivers under my touch, and I smile against his skin.

Did he experience the same little buzz of power when our roles were reversed so long ago when I was sitting out here alone?

I'd been so naïve and desperate for attention, and he'd been nothing more than a whisper in the dark.

I run the tips of my fingers over his cold chest. His flesh is covered in goosebumps, and his nipples are tight.

"What do you want with me, Hellcat?" Eli asks.

"Out here, you belong to me," I lean forward and lick one nipple.

Eli hisses in response. "You want to play?"

"Do *you* want to play? Red or green?"

He doesn't even hesitate. "Green."

I kiss his other nipple. "Good boy."

A smirk curves his lips. "I think you like being a good girl more."

The way he says the words so silkily sends warmth flooding through me. "I'm in charge tonight, not you."

I move around him, caressing the scars on his back that he had once hated and kept hidden from the world. Trailing my lips over the faint silver blemishes, I lick and kiss each I see. Unlike the boy he'd been, he doesn't try to move away from my touch. He doesn't even flinch. He remains still, and it makes me wonder how much of his shivers are from the cold.

There's the scent of cologne clinging to him, familiar and comforting. That's one thing that hasn't changed. He still smells the same way I remember.

"What do you plan to do with me?" He sounds so calm, but there's a hint of amusement in his voice.

He isn't the shy eighteen-year-old virgin I'd been when we'd done this the first time. I will have to get a little more creative to make this work.

I catch his wrist and raise his hand to my mouth. "Give me your index finger."

He obeys, curling his fingers into his palm until only the one I requested remains. I guide his hand forward and push the finger into my mouth. As it sinks past my lips to the knuckle, I

swirl my tongue around it and suck.

“Fuck,” he breathes.

I work his finger like it's his cock, pushing it in and out of my mouth. After a few minutes, I release it with a little pop.

I turn and move back to the tree I was hiding behind when he arrived. It had taken me a few minutes to find the perfect vantage point so I wouldn't be seen from the bench. Once I'm back there, I take my phone out and text him.

Me: Times up. You've been a very good boy.

I hit send and peek from behind the tree. A second after his cell pings, he tugs off the blindfold and glances around. When he doesn't spot me, he checks his cell.

“Hellcat?” Eli calls instead of texting back.

I don't reply.

“Ari, you don't have to walk back alone in the dark.”

How often had I done this? Had he always followed behind me.

I glance toward the wall surrounding the cemetery in the dark. My heart is hammering against my ribs, and I can't help but be jumpy. It's just us out here. I'm tempted to come out of my hiding place, but I don't. Lifting my phone, I shoot off another message.

Me: Go.

Eli checks his cell when it chimes.

Eli: At least keep pace with me.

Me: I'll be right behind you.

Eli: That is not what I meant.

Me: That's all you're getting.

Eli: You're so fucking stubborn. Fine, but text me when you get into the dorm.

Me: Ok.

Phone clutched in my hand, I wait until he walks away from the bench, and then follow him. Pace slow, I huddle deeper in my hoodie, keeping him in view the whole journey along the path in the dark. Knowing he's right there and will come if I call eases some of my worries about being outside in the dark.

I stop by the tree line and watch while he strolls across the grass toward the dorm building.

Is he deliberately going slowly so I'll catch him up? He knows this isn't how it's supposed to work. I never got glimpses of him as Sin.

A twig snaps behind me, and the sound is enough to send my heart leaping up into my throat.

"Shit."

My legs move, and I take off toward the school. I don't stop until I reach the safety of the dorm. With a nervous glance over my shoulder, I chastise myself.

There are no scary monsters lurking in the shadows. It was probably an animal.

Puffing out a little breath, I flatten a hand over my racing heart. When I enter the building, I see Eli disappearing up the stairs.

Was he waiting for me?

I hang around for a couple of minutes before I venture up to my floor. There's no sign of anyone and I reach my door without interruption. I slip inside and flip on the light, making sure to lock the door behind me. I've barely kicked off my sneakers before I'm typing Eli a text.

Me: I'm in my room.

The dots undulate below my message.

Eli: Good.

I sink onto the edge of my bed, chewing my lip.

Is he disappointed with how quickly our meeting ended?

I should have done more. I wanted to make it as exciting for him as it was for me when I used to meet him as Sin.

An idea hits me. I stretch out on the bed and type out a text.

Me: Were you hard when you were standing by the bench, and I was touching you? I want you to touch yourself. Close your eyes and pretend it's me. Make yourself come. Red or green, my Nasty Little

Monster?

CHAPTER 66

ELI

Me: You want me to get off for you, Hellcat?

Ari: Yes.

Me: Shall I text you when I'm done?

Ari: Yes.

Me: How do you know I won't lie?

The dots pop up, disappear, return, and disappear again. I strip down to my underwear while I wait for a response. When my cell finally chimes with an incoming text, I'm stretched out on the bed.

Ari: Record it and send it to me.

Me: You want a video of me jerking off?

Ari: Yes. Red or green?

I laugh quietly to myself. She's really embracing the role of tormentor and, fool that I am, I'm too invested in giving her what she wants to deny her.

Me: Green.

I'm not entirely certain how I'm going to make this work, but with a bit of maneuvering I figure out a way to prop my cell against one of the pillows. I don't need to do any prep work before hitting record. My dick is hard as steel when I

wrap my fingers around it, has been since she touched me at the bench. Hooking the thumb of my other hand into the waistband of my boxer briefs, I drag them down, releasing my dick.

I try to put on a show for her, pumping my dick up and down in slow smooth strokes, but the sensation combined with the knowledge that she's going to watch it back makes me harder and I'm panting and stroking in rough jerky moves less than two minutes after starting.

I feel like a schoolboy about to get his very first blowjob, out of control and unable to stop myself from coming too quickly. Gritting my teeth, I battle against the building desire. My thumb sweeps over the head of my dick, smearing the precum over the tip.

My thoughts snap back to her on her knees, sucking my dick deep into her mouth for the very first time, in the dark of the tomb all those years ago, and that's all it takes.

“Fuck ... Fuck ... *Fuck!*”

My breathing is heavy ... harsh in the room. The back of my hand is wet and sticky, covered in my cum. I let my head drop against the pillows and reach out with my other hand to tap the stop button.

With languid movements, I open the text app, attach the video and send it.

Me: I didn't last very long. I was thinking about you the entire time.

Not exactly the most suave thing to say, but it's all I've got.

Pushing up off the bed, I go into the bathroom and clean up. I catch sight of myself in the mirror as I turn to leave. I stop and stare, seeing an image of myself as an eighteen-year-old superimposed over the top of my reflection.

I haven't changed a lot, but I've changed *enough*. I'm broader across the shoulders and arms. My hair is longer. The shape of my jaw is hidden under a few inches of growth—not quite a beard, but too long to be called stubble. There are faint lines at the corner of my eyes. My body is covered in tattoos—more than the four or five I had when I was eighteen. Snakes, dragons, demons, and angels cover my arms and back. Words—Nasty Little Monster, and Feed Me, Fuck Me, Fight Me—cover my ribs. A cat sits on my side, her tail curled around my hip, with the words 'My kitten has a hellcat hidden inside of her' written beneath it.

I turn away from the mirror and walk back into the bedroom, avoiding the side of the bedroom that Kellan used to use. Hitting the light switch, the room goes dark. I take the steps necessary to reach the bed and drop onto the mattress. The curtains are closed, but a sliver of moonlight peeks through the small gap.

What the fuck are you doing? Coming here is such a bad idea. What is it going to achieve?

Now my mind is unoccupied by thoughts of Arabella and the game she started, it's returning to the reality of where I am.

I roll onto my side, then twist onto my back. I can't get comfortable. I can't sleep. I can't relax. My brain won't switch off. Every time I close my eyes, all I see are memories of Kellan in this room, hear his laughter, the way he muttered when he worked on his laptop.

"Fuck." I sit up.

Maybe I should go for a walk. Clear my head. Try and exhaust myself.

If fucking around in the woods with Arabella, and then jerking off thinking about her isn't going to relax you enough to sleep, why do you think going for another walk will?

"Stop being so fucking logical."

Someone needs to be. And clearly that isn't you right now.

"Shut up."

I climb out of bed, search for my sweats and drag them on. I'm rummaging through my suitcase for a clean t-shirt when there's a quiet tap on the door.

I stop and scowl.

What the fuck?

The tapping starts again the second I turn back to my suitcase.

I straighten and stride across to the door and look through the peephole. Blonde hair, blue eyes, a pensive expression—that's all it takes for me to throw open the door. She's standing

there in my hoodie and a pair of pink pajama pants.

“Is everything okay?” I look down the hallway. “Has someone tried to fuck with you?”

Arabella blinks, and her expression clears. “What? Oh! No. Can I come in?”

I take a step back. She walks past me and stops just inside the door, looking around curiously.

“It hasn’t changed at all.”

“I know.” My voice comes out flat, and she darts a glance at me.

“That’s why I’m here.” She turns to face me. “I can’t sleep up there. Every single sound I hear, it sends me back to that night when ...” She catches her bottom lip between her teeth. “I didn’t expect it to hit me quite that hard. It’s just a room and it was years ago, you know?”

I don’t say anything, but I close the door and then turn to lean against it, watching her.

“Anyway, it made me think ... if I’m having trouble relaxing, how much worse is it for you ... in here? So I thought ...” She licks her lips. “If you don’t mind, that is, we could ... *not sleep* ... together?”

I rub my hand over my jaw. “You want to stay here ... with *me* ... tonight?”

“If that’s not okay, I could go and see if Miles and—”

“It’s okay.”

“You’re sure?”

I nod. Why the fuck wouldn’t it be okay? If she wants to stay with me, she’s more than welcome to stay with me. Haven’t I made that clear to her?

“There’s the spare bed ...” I wave a hand, without looking, to Kellan’s side of the room.

“No. No, I would rather share with you.” She emphasizes that by climbing onto my bed, pulling off the hoodie to reveal a strappy top that matches her pants, and dragging the sheets over her legs.

I don’t move, staring at her from my place in front of the door.

“Eli?” She pulls back the sheets and pats the mattress. “Come to bed.”

I hit the light switch, plunging the room back into darkness and cross to where she’s sitting.

“What are you doing?” I ask her softly, stretching out beside her.

She slides across the bed, wraps an arm around my waist and burrows her face into my shoulder. “I just don’t want to be alone here tonight and thought you might feel the same way.”

She makes no mention of the games or the texts or the video I sent her. Closing my eyes, I tip my head back.

“Everywhere I turn, I see him. I hear him talking,” I confess quietly into the darkness. “I fucking talk to him, Ari. *Every. Single. Day.*”

The arm around my waist tightens and her lips brush against my throat, but she doesn’t speak.

“I go over that week in my head all the time.”

Now I’ve started talking, I can’t fucking stop. The words spill out of me, while inside I scream at myself to hold it in, not dump it all on her.

“How the fuck did Evan do it? He took Miles, then killed Kellan. *How?* Was he really doing it alone or was someone helping him? Is someone else still walking free? I’ve read over the court case so many fucking times. And every single time I come away with one thought. He can’t have done it alone. There’s no way he could have got both Miles *and* Kellan without help. There was something more to it. Someone helping him. I’m *sure* of it.”

“Miles doesn’t like talking about it.” Ari’s voice is soft.

“I know. And, back then, I wasn’t in the right state of mind to ask him to tell us what happened. He told the police he wasn’t sure what happened ... but I wonder if that was because of survivor’s guilt.”

“You think he didn’t share information that might have been useful?” She lifts her head.

“Not on purpose. I think he was just as distraught as I was.

He *watched* Kellan die. He wasn't going to want to relive that, not while it was still so raw. But ...” I hesitate for a moment and suck in a breath before admitting to something I haven't voiced in over ten years. “I need to hear about Kellan's last moments, Ari. I need to know what happened to him.”

Her fingers stroke over my lips, my jaw, and she presses a kiss to my throat. “We could ask Miles and see if he'll talk. We'd need to be careful, though. I don't want him to think we're blaming him for something.”

Hearing her say *we* instead of *you* warms something inside me. I turn my head toward her and bury my face into her hair, inhaling her scent. She cuddles closer, throwing one leg over mine, and we lay in silence, wrapped in our own thoughts until sleep finally pulls us under.

When I open my eyes the next morning, she's gone.

CHAPTER 67

ARABELLA

Wakefulness comes slowly. I'm sprawled against something warm and firm, and the heat radiating off it doesn't make me want to move. Stretching a little, I open my eyes to find myself curled around Eli.

What time is it?

A golden shaft of morning sunlight cuts through a crack in the drawn curtains. There's no noise beyond the dorm room door. It has to be early.

In my still-sleepy state, I half expect to see Kellan sprawled across the other bed, fast asleep, on the other side of the room. The empty mattress sends a heavy pang of sorrow through my chest.

My gaze returns to Eli, and tracks over his sleeping face, cataloging the differences to the boy he'd once been. We'd held each other all night long to keep the nightmares away. He had whispered things to me. Things I'm not sure he would have admitted in the cold light of day.

As much as I want to stay with him, I can't. I don't want him to get the wrong impression when he wakes up. When we fuck, it's always been fierce. Biting, scratching, and savage. But as much as I crave his touch, I don't want to have sex with him right now. Not after the moment we'd shared last night. This was about taking and offering comfort. I'm not going to

ruin that. Because when we fuck, we fight. And I don't want to fight with him today.

I lift his arm and slide out, trying not to disturb him. When I reach the edge of the mattress, I crawl out from under the covers, and twist around to check he's still asleep. He hasn't moved from his position, his body is relaxed, hair messy around his face.

For a heartbeat, I watch him breathing, then turn and tiptoe toward the door. As quietly as I can, I slip out of his room and hurry along the hallway. I don't see a single person on my way back to my room. The second I enter, I lock it behind me. I have a few hours before breakfast. It's enough time to have a long relaxing soak in the tub and decide what to wear for the day. Later, when Eli is ready, we can talk to Miles together.

Dressed comfortably in a pair of jeans and black sweater, I lock the door and pocket the key. I've tied my hair into a ponytail and haven't bothered to put on much makeup. Just a little lip gloss and some mascara.

Nervousness buzzes through me at seeing Eli this morning.

A few other people are emerging from their rooms at the same time as me. Some of them ignore me, while others give me a cheerful smile. It feels so surreal to be back here. I'd been tempted to text Miles and meet them to go down to breakfast, but in the end, decided against it. I'm not a friendless kid in need of protection, anymore. I'm an adult,

with years of self-defense training.

I leave the dorm and stroll across the grass toward the main building. A flow of guests is already making their way inside. I join them, following them through the doors of the cafeteria. The aroma of fried bacon and eggs makes my stomach rumble. I need coffee and food. Scanning the faces, I search for Eli, Miles, and Ivan, but there's no sign of them yet.

I head toward the line just as someone steps in front of me.

The blue-eyed woman rakes her acid gaze over me. "Well, well, well, if isn't Arabella Gray."

"Hello, Lacy."

"We honestly didn't expect to see you here."

"Why not?"

She snorts. "You were barely here for a year."

"And?"

She folds her arms. "It's not like you were welcome here."

My stomach twists, the memories of her vindictiveness awakening old pain. "I remember."

Tina, Linda, and a few of the jocks detach themselves from their table to come and join us. We're drawing attention from around the room, people staring and whispering.

The former cheerleader doesn't smile. "So, why did you come back now?"

I wait for her friends to come to a stop behind her before I

answer. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

There’s a stunned silence.

Lacy blinks. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I don’t have to explain my motives for returning to school. It certainly wasn’t to see any of *you*.”

Her eyes narrow, jaw clenching. “You’re the reason my dad had me mucking out the horse stables for six months after the academy closed.”

My anger stirs just beneath the surface. “So, you shoveled shit? It must have been a change from talking it all the time.”

She takes a step toward me. “You bitch—”

“Jesus, Lacy. Grow up.” Garrett appears out of the crowd and puts himself between us. “You’re not eighteen anymore. Get the fuck over it.”

Her lips curl in a sneer. “Oh look, Garrett coming to your rescue again.”

I step around him. “I don’t need to be saved because you and your little friends can’t intimidate me anymore. You were sad and pathetic back then, and it looks like things haven’t changed.”

“You’re nothing but trash, Gray,” Linda calls.

“That should have been swept away,” Tina adds.

I roll my eyes and sigh. “Why don’t you go and get a fucking life?”

Lacy sends me a venomous glare before turning on her heels and stalking away back to her table. The others follow in her wake, and for one brief second, I'm right back there ten years ago when they'd made my life nothing but miserable.

A hand touches my shoulder. "Forget them."

It's enough to bring me back from the shadows of the past and ground me to the here and now before they can spiral. I focus on the good-looking red-headed man in front of me.

"Garrett." I hug him. "It's good to see you."

"Let me look at you." Gently taking hold of my shoulders, he pushes me back and sweeps his attention over me. "Damn, you were gorgeous when you were younger, but now you're stunning. You aren't leaving here until I get your details. Now we're back together, we are going to stay in touch this time."

"I promise." I glance toward Lacy and the others. "I guess that bitch was never going to change."

"She and Brad got married about a year after we graduated."

I arch an eyebrow at the revelation. "I didn't expect her to stay with him."

"I don't think Lacy planned it," Garrett's voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. "But she got herself pregnant, and her dad told her to marry him, or he'd cut her off. They have five kids, and he's running one of his father's car dealerships."

"What about you?" I ask him, studying his face. "Are you married? Kids?"

He shakes his head. “No, not yet. Maybe one day. I don’t see a ring on your finger. Are you and Eli together?”

“We’re...” I struggle to find the right words.

“A thing?”

“I don’t even know what to call it.”

Garrett laughs. “I guess things haven’t changed with you two either. What I do know, though, is that Eli has never looked at anyone the way he looks at you.”

CHAPTER 68

ELI

Walking into the cafeteria throws me back in time. The familiar voices, the smells of food, the line of people waiting to get breakfast. Almost involuntary, my gaze sweeps across the line looking for Kellan, and a sharp stab of pain twists my heart when I realize what I'm doing.

Got to get your own coffee, idiot.

I join the end of the line and pull out my cell to give me something to do while I wait.

“Oh my god! *Eli!*”

I'm enveloped in a cloud of strong perfume and look up to find myself surrounded by four women.

“You look *amazing!*” It takes me a second or two to associate the voice with the girl from ten years ago.

“Lacy.” I incline my head, but don't return the compliment.

Her hand lands on my arm, smooths up to my shoulder, and then her mouth is coming toward mine. I turn my head to avoid her lips, so she ends up kissing my cheek. “I'd *love* to catch up ... just you and me.” Her voice is a whisper in my ear.

I pull away, and scan over the interior of the cafeteria. There's a small cluster of people at my usual table. I untangle myself from Lacy's arms, and step away.

“I’m sorry, I have plans.” Opting not to wait in the line any longer, I stride across the room.

Kellan’s seat is empty, but there’s a coffee in his place. I frown at it before redirecting my attention to the blonde in the seat beside his.

“Good morning.” She breaks off her conversation with Miles and Garrett to greet me, head tipping up to smile.

I don’t say anything, and her smile falters when I don’t return it. My tongue flicks against my lip ring.

“Arabella Gray.” I say her name slowly, savoring the words, then reach out and wrap a hand around her arm so I can pull her to her feet.

I have a quick glimpse of wide, surprised blue eyes, and then my mouth is on hers, tongue slipping between her lips. She tastes of coffee and something slightly sweeter ... maple syrup from the pancakes she’s been eating.

My tongue licks over her lips, and I delve back inside to taste her sweetness again. Her lips part, and I give a contented growl at the back of my throat, when her hands lift to loop around my neck.

The noise around us recedes, the world shrinking until it’s just us. My hand slides up her spine, finds her ponytail and I curl my fingers around it, using it to tug her head back a little and pull her closer to me.

When we finally break apart, I run my tongue over my lips.

Her eyes follow the movement, then shift up to meet mine. They're dark, hazy, slightly dazed, and she licks her lips, then bites into her bottom one. A slight blush tinges her cheeks with pink.

“I think I just got pregnant.” The dry voice breaks the spell holding us both captive, and she turns to look at the man who spoke.

I turn my head and hike an eyebrow at Garrett. He grins at me and holds out a mug of coffee. “I saw you being harassed by the hyenas in the line, so I grabbed you a drink.”

I take it, and nod. “Thank you. I appreciate that.” I move around the table and drop into my usual seat and take a sip.

Arabella stands in place for a moment longer, then blinks and sinks into the seat on the opposite side of the table.

I jerk my chin toward the mug in front of Kellan's seat. “Who does that belong to?”

She gives me a small smile. “It's Kellan's.”

My confession in the dark comes back to me, and something clogs up my throat. I mask my reaction by burying my face into the mug of coffee.

“He might not be here physically, but he *is* with us,” she continues quietly.

She has no idea how much I need to hear someone else say that. Or maybe she does. The look she gives me holds a wealth of understanding and she reaches across the table to cover my

hand with hers.

After a second, Miles' hand comes down on top of hers and the three of us sit in silence, staring down at where we're all linked.

"Not a day goes by when I don't think of him at least once." Miles' voice is rough, shaky with emotion. "I love Ivan, don't get me wrong, but part of me wishes he was Kellan."

"Where *is* Ivan?" I ask, finally noticing the other man's absence.

"Still sleeping. Although I think he was pretending, just so I could have some time alone with you guys."

I give a slow nod, then turn to look at him. "We need to talk."

There's no surprise on his features at my words. "So, Arabella said. I knew this day would come. Can we find somewhere quieter, though? I don't really want to have a breakdown in front of all these assholes." His laugh breaks slightly before he rallies and smiles around the table. "It's time. And I think Kellan would appreciate it being done at the school."

"Why don't we meet for dinner? I can place an order instead of us coming down here," I suggest. "The school has a planned list of events for today, I think, and I suppose we should show up for now."

CHAPTER 69

ARABELLA

Miles nods, his hand slipping from on top of mine. “Where?”

“How about your room,” I suggest. My lips are still tingling from Eli’s possessive kiss. At least he doesn’t seem to be angry with me for slipping out early this morning and leaving him.

“I think it would be the easiest,” my best friend agrees. “Kellan never used to come to my room. We just met in private around the school when we ... when we were together.”

“Neutral territory for all of us,” Eli says, leaning back on his seat. “At least for memories of him.”

Garrett shifts in his chair. “You’re serious about reliving all of this? I still have nightmares.”

I smile at him sadly. “We all do.”

“Count me in then.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No, I do.” He huffs out a breath. “I didn’t just come back here for the reunion. I’ve been carrying around questions in my head. What ifs—”

“Which we shouldn’t discuss here.” Eli interrupts them. Cradling his mug of coffee in his hands, he’s glancing past us.

I turn my head to see Lacy and her entourage watching us closely. “What the hell is her problem?”

Miles glares at them. “She’s a bitch, trying to relive her glory days.”

“Jesus, it’s like being back at school again,” Garrett grumbles. “We’re fucking grownups. You think they’d have just learned to get over this shit.”

“Stop staring. It just feeds their crazy.” Miles takes a sip from his drink.

I shift my attention back to Eli. “Are you hungry? I can go get you something.”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m good.”

“Are you sure? You didn’t eat much at dinner last night.”

Miles chuckles. “Food is Ari’s love language. If she’s trying to feed you. It means she cares.”

Eli’s intense gaze slides to mine. “Do you care about me, Arabella Gray?”

My cheeks flush with warmth. “I’ve never said I didn’t, Eli Travers.”

“If I can have your attention.” The booming voice of Principal Warren sends a hush through the room. “The school tour starts in ten minutes. If you would like to join us outside the cafeteria, we will break you into three groups to show you around.”

“Well, that’s my cue,” Miles discards his drink and rises from his chair. “I better go and get Ivan. He was interested in having a look around.”

“I thinking I’m going to sit this one out.” Garrett rakes a hand through his hair. “I’d rather explore alone than in a crowd.”

My attention turns to Eli. “It looks like it’s just you and me.”

His tongue snakes out to flick his lip ring. “You want to go on the tour?”

“Why not? It will be interesting to see what they’ve done. How things have changed.”

“If that’s what you want to do, then that’s our plan.”

Leaving our mugs on the table, we head out with the rest of the crowd. Principal Warren splits everyone into three groups. He guides one while two other teachers take the rest. Miles and Ivan end up with Mr. Bellamy. Eli and I are assigned to Miss Winters. Linda, Bret, and Jace are also in our party.

Eli takes my hand, threading his fingers through mine. “Why did you sneak away this morning?”

I hesitate for a second before answering. “Because I didn’t want you to think I was there for sex.”

Even though I’d just seduced you out in the dark on the bench by the cemetery. Even though I’d dared you to make yourself come. I don’t want you to know how aroused I’d been watching the video of you getting off afterward.

Eli frowns. "It never crossed my mind."

I roll my eyes. "Sure, it didn't."

His expression doesn't change. "For clarity, you're saying you don't want to have sex with me?"

My pulse speeds up, and I study his expression. "You're very forward for someone I've just met, Mr. Travers."

"I'm just wondering if I have a shot with you, Miss Gray."

"Oh, I never said you didn't."

"If you would like to come this way, we'll start with the library," Miss Winters calls, her long red skirts swirling around her ankle boots as she moves. "We've made some improvements since you were last here."

Everyone follows her, but we hang back, waiting until the rest of the group has gone ahead of us before walking behind them. Eli keeps a firm grip on my hand, and unlike yesterday, I don't think it's for support or reassurance.

"Do you think they know about the tunnels?"

He pulls me into his side as we walk across the grass. "I never mentioned them to anyone during the interviews and interrogations after. There seemed little point."

"Neither did I. But they might have found them when they were restoring the place."

Eli shrugs. "It's possible."

Did they discover the hidden door in the closet on my floor?

The thought piques my curiosity for a moment, but I push it aside. Even if it is still there, do I want to go blindly sneaking around in the dark? Especially as it leads all the way to the tomb.

To my delight, the library hasn't been as modernized as I'd feared. It still holds an old worldliness that captured my imagination when I was eighteen. There are rows and rows of dark wooden bookcases you could get lost in. The study area has been moved closer to the windows, and another space is clustered with leather chairs. A spiral staircase leads up to the second floor, which is full of more bookcases. It's a bookworm's wet dream.

As we pass one of the tables, Eli stops to pluck one of the bright, colorful flowers from a glass vase. He lifts it to his nose, then looks at me and smiles.

“What are you doing?”

With gentle fingers, he tucks the flower behind my ear. “There.”

“You know, technically, that's stealing?”

He leans in and brushes his lips over mine. “A beautiful flower for a beautiful woman.”

A flood of warmth washes through me. “We're getting left behind.”

He doesn't look away. “After you, my gorgeous girl.”

I was in love with this man when I was eighteen. I'd told

myself for years that I was over him, yet right at this second, I am crushing on him *hard*.

If this is Eli flirting, I'm not sure I would have ever had the strength to walk away from him when I did.

CHAPTER 70

ELI

We stroll along a little way behind the rest of the group, hand in hand. Occasionally, I let my thumb stroke across the sensitive skin of her inner wrist, just to feel the way her fingers squeeze around mine.

I'm testing the waters. We fooled around a little last night, by the bench in the dark, in a game of role reversal, then she sneaked into my bed and behaved as though she hadn't received a video of me jerking off for her pleasure. The way she's behaving fascinates me. I'd hidden the two sides of myself all those years ago for a reason—a stupid reason older me can admit—and I wonder what reason she has for doing the same now.

“As you can see, the locker area hasn't changed other than a clean-up of the paintwork. Our intention is to replace all the lockers before the school reopens, but we thought you'd all like the opportunity to gather any of your belongings that may remain inside them.” Miss Winters looks over the small group, before pausing on me. “Mr. Travers, I believe you were the sole heir for Kellan Fraser.” I tense at his name but manage to keep my expression clear. “I have his locker key here. Principal Warren suggested I offer it to you along with yours.”

All eyes are on me as I move forward and take the offered keys. “Thank you.”

She smiles and switches her attention to the woman beside me, her gaze dropping briefly to our linked fingers. “Ms. Gray, it’s nice to see that you and Mr. Travers appear to have resolved whatever troubles you had between you.”

I lift Arabella’s fingers to my lips. “I’m working on it.”

“Well, judging by how red she’s just turned, I think you’re doing rather well.” Miss Winters laughs and turns to the rest of the group. “I’ll give you twenty minutes to go through the lockers. There are bags on a chair at the end of the hallway for you to put your belongings in, and then we’ll move through to the main area of the school.”

“Do you want to open your locker first?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not sure I want to look.”

“Well, I know I have at least one sketchbook in mine that I’d like back, so what do you say? Want to go and see what dark and dirty things eighteen-year-old Eli Travers kept in his locker?” I waggle my eyebrows at her.

She stares at me for a second, then laughs softly. “I *am* curious.”

She follows along to where mine and Kellan’s lockers are located, and I unlock mine. We both look inside.

“That’s ... disappointing.”

I laugh at the despondent tone in her voice.

“What did you expect to find in here?” I pull out the English textbook, a case full of pencils and pens, and two sketchbooks.

“Condoms? Dirty photographs?” I reach to the back of the locker and take out a scrunched-up strip of silky material and hold it up, hooked over one fingertip. “Or your missing pair of panties?”

Her jaw drops. “Oh my god!”

I chuckle softly. “It was before all the shit started. Just after we started hooking up at the tomb.” I lower my head and rest my lips against her ear. “I spent a lot of years reliving those nights in my head. Of you spread out on the tomb, my tongue between your legs, while you moaned for me.”

She makes a strangled sound, cheeks bright red, and snatches the panties off my finger and stuffs them into her bag.

“Those memories got me through some very dark nights,” I tell her quietly, then straighten and turn to Kellan’s locker.

“You don’t have to open it right now.” Her hand rests against my back. “We could come back when no one else is here.”

One side of my mouth tips up into a smile. “And give Lacy and her minions the idea that I can’t bear to be reminded of what happened to Kellan?”

“It doesn’t matter what they think.” Her voice is fierce.

I carefully place the books I’m holding back inside my locker, then turn fully to face her. Dropping her hand, I lift both of mine to cup her face between my palms. “Have I ever told you how special you are, Arabella Gray?”

Her lips part, and I press one finger over them. “It doesn’t matter how much I pushed you away, hurt you, or made you cry, the size of your heart is incredible. Don’t ever let anyone destroy your ability to care. It makes you unique. You understand that’s why Lacy and Tina and the others all hated you, don’t you? It’s why you scrambled my mind so much back then. I couldn’t believe that someone like you could exist. So, fucking perfect.” I dip my head and cover her lips with mine. “So beautiful. Inside and out,” I whisper. “I could spend the rest of my life apologizing for what I did to you, and I will still never be able to make up for it.”

“Eli—”

I kiss her lips, her cheeks and then the tip of her nose before I straighten and drop my hands.

Lacy and Linda are glaring at us. I toss them a smile.

“Problem, ladies?”

They spin away without speaking. I press my forehead to Arabella’s. “Maybe we should open *your* locker next. Let’s see what disturbing ‘*I hate Eli Travers*’ trinkets you have hidden in there.”

CHAPTER 71

ARABELLA

My laugh comes out shaky, while a dozen butterflies do loops-de-loops in my stomach. “I’m pretty sure I don’t have any of those.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did. I wasn’t very nice.”

I silence him by pressing my lips against his, and it feels right, warm, and *perfect*. “I’m sure there’s going to be nothing more exciting than an old English textbook.”

He keeps one of his hands on my waist. “Then let’s see.”

He walks with me along the hallway. The rest of the group is busy going through their old belongings. When we reach mine, I curl my fingers tightly around the key in my hand.

How many times had I opened it looking for dares? How many times had there been something unpleasant waiting for me?

“Do you want me to do it for you?” El’s voice is soft.

I shake my head. “No, I’ll be okay.”

I take a deep breath, unlock the metal door, and pull it open. There’s a pile of books inside. The top one is the sketchbook for my clothing designs. But on top of that is something else. A white chess piece.

I pick it up. “I don’t remember this.”

He takes it from me. “The pawn is the weakest piece in a game of chess.”

“Do you think *he* put it in here? Before he...” I can’t bring myself to say Evan’s name or what he did to Kellan.

Jaw tightening, Eli closes his fingers around the chess piece. “Maybe.” He slips it into his pocket.

I don’t comment on the fact that he wants to keep it. If he’d given it back to me, I would have dumped it in the nearest trash can knowing Evan Ridley had his hands on it.

A strange sense of déjà vu hits me, but I’m not sure why. I push it aside, and rummage through the books until I find the sketchbook I’m after. There isn’t anything else worth taking, so I close the door and lock it back up.

“We have one more locker to go.” I keep my voice light. “Want to do it together?”

“Yeah.”

A few people stop to watch us as we move back to Kellan’s locker. Eli ignores them. I glare at them, which sends most of them back to their own business. All except Lacy, Linda, and Jace. They continue to watch us from the other end of the hallway.

Eli halts in front of the locker.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No,” His lips curl in a faint smile. “It has to be me.”

That's something I understand. Just as I had to open mine, Eli has to be the one to face this. But he's not alone, not with me beside him.

This is part of the process of moving on. It's what we need to finally start to heal. Ivan is right. We need to lay the past to rest.

"Take your time," I whisper, when he doesn't move, his eyes locked onto the metal door.

The sound of my voice seems to snap him out of his trance. He takes a step forward and slots the key in the lock, and inches the door open. There's an old tablet on top of a stack of books. Photographs are stuck to the inside of the metal door. A few of Eli and Zoey. Then another of the three of them together.

"That's my math book." Eli's voice is low and raw. "He always brought my books down the night before, so I had them for class."

I curl my fingers loosely around his hand. "You should keep the photos."

"And the tablet ... it should still work."

"We can get a charger from somewhere."

"There's one in the box of Kellan's stuff in my room."

My heart aches. "We can look at the tablet when it's fully charged."

He closes his eyes for a brief moment. "Would you do it

with me?”

I squeeze his hand tightly. “We’ll do it together.”

CHAPTER 72

ELI

I gather up the stuff from the lockers and stash it all in one of the bags supplied by the school. There's a prickling between my shoulder blades, and I'm sure if I turn around, I'll find one or more of the other students watching me.

I'm starting to feel like I'm in a weird reality tv show—my every move being watched, assessed, and discussed. Has everyone walked through the gates of Churchill Bradley and forgotten they are now twenty-eight years old? Have they reverted to their eighteen-year-old selves? Have their lives been so unhappy that this is the only thing they have left that makes them feel alive?

I straighten and turn slowly, my gaze moving over everyone in the hallway. Most of the ex-students are focused on their own lockers, but Lacy and Linda are leaning against the far wall, eyes on me. Jace is nearby, also looking in my direction, but his expression is more uneasy than anything else.

Out of all the people involved with Evan, Jace had the most involvement with his schemes. Part of me is surprised he turned up to this event, another part of me isn't. I'm pretty sure Jace Black is just as much a victim of Evan's manipulations as everyone else.

"Wait here," I instruct Arabella in a low voice.

"Why? Where are you going?"

I nod toward Jace. Her fingers curl around my sleeve. “Eli —”

“It’s okay.” I pat her fingers, then peel them off. “Wait here.” I set off toward the other man.

His gaze doesn’t leave mine, nor does he attempt to evade me. Instead, he straightens and lets his arms drop to his sides. I stop when I’m an arm’s length away from him. Up close, I can see the suit he’s wearing is old. There’s a slight sheen to the material where it’s worn over time. His shirt is rumpled, with faint stains that haven’t washed out. I wonder what happened to him. His family was as rich as mine when we were growing up.

His throat moves as he swallows, and he drags a hand through his hair, shoving it away from his forehead. “I wasn’t sure if you’d come back.”

“I wasn’t sure, either. Why *did* you?”

“To see you.”

That wasn’t the answer I was expecting. “To see *me*? Why?”

“Can we go somewhere and talk? I don’t really want to do it with an audience.” His eyes dart past me to where Lacy and Linda stand. “I don’t know about you, but I feel like I’m on a stage, with everyone staring and waiting for the action to begin.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

His jaw clenches. “You know what.”

“Spell it out to me.”

He nods. “Okay, I expected this. I knew it wouldn’t be easy.” He releases a shaky breath. “Look, Eli, what happened ten years ago was fucked up. I’d really like for us to sit down and talk about it. I don’t expect your forgiveness, but I’d like to tell you what happened from my side of things. My therapist says ... well, she thinks it would be good for me to tell you everything I wanted to say back then ... maybe it will be good for you, too.”

“Closure,” I say quietly, and he nods again. “I think everyone is here looking for closure in some form or other.”

His tongue licks over his lips. “I understand if you tell me to fuck off.”

“A few years ago, that’s exactly what I would have done.” I rub my jaw, eyeing him. “Okay. I’ll give you your moment. When?”

“They should be breaking for lunch soon. How about then?”

“Sure. Where?”

“We could take a walk out to the football field. Sit on the bleachers?”

“Want to relive your glory days?” My lip curls.

He laughs quietly. “Something like that.”

“Alright, I’ll meet you out there at lunchtime. Mind if I bring someone with me?”

His gaze shifts past me again.” Arabella?”

“If she wants to come, that is.”

“She should hear what I have to say as well.”

He holds out his hand. I look down at it, then slowly take it in mine and we shake.

“I’ll see you at lunch.” I turn and make my way back to Arabella.

“What was that about?” she demands as soon as I reach her.

“He wants to talk.”

“*Talk?*”

I drape my arm across her shoulders and tug her closer to me. “We’re not kids anymore, Ari. I don’t think he’s planning to do anything stupid.”

“Everything Jace Black does is stupid.” She mutters the words under her breath.

I laugh and move until I’m standing in front of her. Pressing two fingers beneath her chin, I tip her head up. “I did far worse things to you than he did, and you have given me chance after chance.” I brush my lips over hers. “I’m just paying that opportunity forward. I’ll give him a chance to say his piece and then we can both move on with our lives.”

“Why are you being so ... so ...”

“Mature?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Because it’s what Kellan would want. He hated not having all the answers. If things were reversed and it was Kellan here instead of me, he’d be questioning everyone about that time. But he’s *not* here, so I need to do it for him. If that means listening to Miles explain what happened the day Kellan died, or letting Jace tell me whatever it is he feels he needs to share, then I’ll do it. It doesn’t matter how it makes *me* feel, Ari. I didn’t even want to fucking come. I’m only here because Ivan told me *you* were coming. But since I *am* here, and Kellan can’t get closure for himself, I have to do it for both of us. You understand?”

“You’re here because of me?” A frown clouds her expression.

“Did you really think I’d let you walk the halls of Churchill Bradley without the monster at your heels? There’s no fucking way I’m leaving you alone with those vultures.” I toss an angry glare at Lacy, who looks away.

“I thought, after New York—”

“I really liked your video.” I trace a finger around her lips. “Especially the part where you fell off the bed.”

Her cheeks flame.

“I didn’t think you’d appreciate me mentioning it, so I didn’t reply. You were drunk, and I promised you a long time ago that I wouldn’t fuck you when you’re drunk.”

She doesn’t get a chance to respond to that because Miss Winters claps her hands. “We’re going to head into the main

education block now, where you'll have the opportunity to catch up with some of your former teachers. If you'll follow me ...” She moves along the hallway to the doors leading outside.

I drop my hand from Arabella's face and link my fingers with hers. She doesn't say anything as we walk with the group to the building where we spent most of our school day.

CHAPTER 73

ARABELLA

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“You could have stayed with Ivan and Miles if you didn’t want to come,” Eli says.

“No way am I leaving you alone with Jace.”

“He’s looking for closure like the rest of us.”

“I’m still not convinced he didn’t have more to do with what Evan did,” My words come out in a fierce rush. “Especially after seeing him the day I got snatched.”

Jace is already waiting for us by the bleachers. Head down, hands in his pockets, he doesn’t look our way as we approach. I can almost hear the crowd’s roar and the cheerleaders’ chants while a home game is being played. If I squint, I can see the field full of players, the stands full of students and teachers. Not that I’d ever bothered after I got kicked off the cheer squad, and the only time Miles showed up to a game was if he wanted to watch one of the players.

The kids we used to be are nothing but echoes now. The ghosts of the past haunt this place just as much as the ones from the graveyard in the forest.

Eli pulls me to a stop and steps in front of me. “He said at the trial he didn’t know Evan was going to take you.”

I scowl up at him. “If he tries anything, I’ll take him down.”

“Are you going to beat him up, Ari?”

“Damn right. I’ll do what I have to protect you.”

His lips curve up. “Are you my bodyguard now?”

I stare up into eyes that have caused me both pleasure and pain. “I’m whatever you need me to be.”

Eli searches my expression for a long moment before he nods. Without another word, he leads me toward the waiting man. There’s no one else on the field. To our right, the bleachers are empty and silent.

Jace glances up. “Arabella. Eli.”

Shaking my hand free of Eli’s hold, I step protectively in front of him. “What do you want, Jace?”

“To talk.”

“Yeah, I remember how that went last time. I ended up in the hands of a psychopath.”

Jace’s expression clouds. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was there. I would never have asked you to meet if I had.”

“Ari, stand down.” Eli’s arms wrap around me from behind, secure, warm, and safe. “What did you want to tell me?”

“I’m sorry about what happened.” Jace breaks eye contact to lower his gaze to the grass. “It’s taken me years to wade through the mess Evan left in my head. My therapist said I have a lot to deal with.”

“No shit,” I mutter. “Just like the rest of us.”

“Ari.” Eli’s arms tighten.

“I got a deferred sentence. Community service instead of jail time for my part in what happened. My parents disowned me.”

Eli rests his chin on the top of my head. “That must have been difficult. What are you doing now?”

“I work at a bar down by the coast and spend my spare time helping out at a soup kitchen for the homeless.” Jace releases a shaky breath. “I’m trying to make amends for everything I did. A twelve-step thing my therapist came up with.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “I didn’t have anything to do with Kellan’s death.”

“But you knew Evan was behind everything.” It’s not a question.

Jace nods. “As I told Arabella all those years ago, he knows how to get in your head and make you feel special. He always knew the right things to say.”

“You weren’t the only one close to him, were you?” Eli’s voice is soft.

Jace hesitates. “He never said anything or mentioned anyone else. I don’t know. He never told me everything. But ... I need to tell you that Evan reached out to me about two years into his sentence.”

Eli goes still behind me. “What did he want?”

“To stay in touch.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. I didn’t answer his letter.” He raises his chin, his eyes filled with torture. “He’s sick in the head. I didn’t want anything else to do with him. I’ve already screwed my life up enough as it is, without getting caught in his web of lies again. I just wanted you to know that he tried to contact me.”

“I’m not sure I can forgive you for your part in what he did, but I hope this talk can help you move on.”

Jace nods jerkily. “Thanks. Just being able to talk to you means a lot to me.”

Lips brush my neck. “Ari?”

I shiver at the contact and feel him smile against my skin.

As much as I distrust the man in front of me, I can’t help a pang of compassion thumping through my chest. “I hope you have a good life, Jace. Don’t let the mistakes of the past define you.”

“I’m sorry.” His shoulders slump. “If I could go back and change things, I would.”

Eli’s arms loosen and slip free from around me. “I think we all would. See you around, Jace.”

I accept the hand he offers me, and we walk away from the former jock, leaving him standing in the middle of the field.

I don’t speak until we’re a good distance away from him. “I don’t trust him.”

He turns his head and meets my gaze. “I’m not surprised after everything that happened.”

“How do we know he’s not lying and is still in contact with Evan?”

“We don’t.”

I frown, thoughts turning inward. “He might be the one behind the flowers.”

“Flowers?”

“Nothing.”

“Ari, what flowers?”

“The ones that kept getting left at Zoey’s plaque in the cemetery.” I don’t want to tell him about the flowers I keep receiving. Now isn’t the time.

The thought of Evan reaching out to Jace makes me feel sick. If he manipulated Jace so easily in the past, who else has the psychopath reached out to in the last ten years?

CHAPTER 74

ELI

“That didn’t take as long as I expected.”

Arabella glances over at me.

“I thought he might have had more to say. We have a while before the afternoon shenanigans start, I think.”

“Shenanigans?” Her lips curl.

I shrug. “Sounds a little less boring than *guided tours around places that haven’t changed all that much.*”

“We don’t have to carry on with the tour.”

I stop on the path. “Very true. In fact, there’s another tour I’d much rather take.”

“There is?” She frowns but follows me when I continue along the path. “I don’t recall seeing anything about other tours.”

“This one is on a need-to-know basis.” I push open the door to the building where most of the classes were held and walk along the hallway.

We’re outside the door to our old math room before she speaks again. “Did you need to get something?”

I toss her a smile over my shoulder while I turn the handle and open the door. “Something like that.”

Reaching back, I take her hand and pull her inside. I kick the

door shut and have her backed against the wall before she realizes what's happening. Her hands come up to press against my chest and she tilts her head back to look up at me.

“What are you doing?”

I rest my hands on the wall either side of her body and stare down at her.

“When we were in here earlier, do you know what I was thinking about?”

“All the times you spent with Kellan?”

“Guess again.”

She frowns. “How much you hate math?”

I chuckle. “No.” Lowering my head, I brush my nose along hers, then step back and tug her across the room.

I stop in front of a desk, turn, and wrap my hands around her waist so I can lift her and set her down on top of it. I use my knee to part her legs and stand between them.

“This was your desk.”

“I remember.”

I smile and lower my head. “Do you remember what I did to you on it?” I whisper against her ear.

She doesn't need to answer because the redness in her cheeks tells me she does remember.

“Do you remember how I had to put my hand over your mouth to stop you calling out? Do you think about it at all?”

How you sat through the entire class, sticky and full of my cum? Do you ever think about the things we did, Ari? The risks we took. Looking back, you were fucking crazy to open yourself to me the way you did.”

I step closer. My dick is straining against the front of my jeans. I take her hand and press her palm against it.

“I want to apologize for everything I put you through, but there’s a part of me that tells me not to, because if I *hadn’t* done those things, I would never have gotten all your firsts.” My lips find hers and I kiss her, slow and leisurely. My tongue licks over her lips, slips between them when they part. “First kiss.” My hand lifts and palms her breast. “First touch.” I wrap my other arm around her waist and pull her forward until her pussy is pressed against my dick. “First fuck.” My teeth nip her bottom lip, suck it into my mouth, and then I draw back until it pulls free. “And I *like* that I was the one to get them.”

She gives a quiet moan, her fingers creeping beneath the hem of my shirt and up over my ribs.

My lips kiss a path along her jaw, down her throat, pausing to suck at the pulse beating at the base.

“My eighteen-year-old self didn’t understand what he was feeling back then. He thought he hated you and needed to break you. He didn’t understand that your darkness matched his. That the both of us were two parts of a whole.” My teeth graze over her shoulder, nipping and biting.

“Wait!” Her fingers flex, nails digging into my stomach.

“The monsters in your paintings ... they’re *you*.”

I smile against her skin. “Of course, they are. And you’re the angel, destined to become his obsession forever.” I lift my head and press another kiss to her lips. “Red or green?”

“What? For what?”

“Does it matter?” I kiss the corner of her mouth. “You’re always going to say green, no matter what the options are.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t I?” I capture her chin between my fingers and kiss her again, hard and fast. “I want to pull down your pants and tongue fuck you right here in the classroom. So, red or green ... Kitten?”

CHAPTER 75

ARABELLA

He made me the angel in his art, and he has always been my beautiful monster in the dark. Even though we've been apart all this time we've always been entwined in each other's lives.

I lick my lips. "You know we could get caught."

"Red or green?" he repeats. "And I don't give a fuck if we are."

The familiar excitement settles low in my stomach, and the hardness of his cock pressing to my center through his jeans makes my pussy throb. This man is my weakness, and he always will be. Every step of the tour we'd taken, I'd wanted to claw at Linda and Lacy's faces because of the way they eye-fucked him every time he looked in their direction.

This man is *mine*. He always has been, irrevocably, since that first day in the kitchen at the house back in Michigan.

"Green." I'm already breathless and aching.

His nostrils flare, the heat in his eyes burning me down to the tips of my toes. "Good girl."

His mouth teases mine with an almost kiss, but when I lean forward to deepen it, he backs away with a soft laugh. When he crouches and pulls off my sneakers then peels down my yoga pants and panties, I glance nervously toward the door. I'm sitting half-naked in a classroom. What if one of the tours

is scheduled to come our way? The thought of a group of ex-students and one of the teachers discovering us has my cheeks hot and my pussy wet.

“Eyes on me, Kitten.”

That deep, dark growl snaps my attention back to the man now kneeling between my spread legs. “Eli—”

“Shh,” His hands grip my thighs, and he draws my legs over his shoulders. “All you have to do is enjoy yourself.”

I tip my head back at the first swipe of his tongue against my slick eager flesh. With one hand braced on the surface of the desk, I tangle my other hand in his hair and rock against his hungry mouth. I groan when his tongue flicks over my clit. Any thought of being caught evaporates. All that matters is the pleasure Eli is giving me.

A finger pushes inside me, slowly thrusting in and out.

I fight against the urge to close my eyes and keep my gaze on the face buried in my pussy. “Oh, Eli.”

He hums in answer, the vibrations rippling straight through me, making my toes curl. A second finger joins the first, and he fucks me with them in a smooth, steady rhythm.

“Please.” My plea comes out on a mewl.

Eli raises his head. “What do you want, Kitten?”

“I ... I want to come.”

His tongue toys with my clit, his lips sealing around it as he

sucks. I bite down on my lip hard to stop myself from screaming. His grip on my thighs tightens, his nails digging into my skin.

A strangled cry tears from my mouth as I orgasm and arch up off the desk. Squeezing my legs together, I clamp them around his head, relishing the way he continues to lap and suck at me.

When he taps my thigh, I relax my legs to free him. He lifts his head, a lazy smile curling his lips.

“As much as I love having your legs wrapped around my head, and I can’t think of a better way to go, I’d like to live a few more years before I suffer death by pussy.”

My eyes widen. “Oh my god! I’m sorry.”

Eli presses a kiss to my inner thigh. “Never be sorry for enjoying what I do to you. I’ve always appreciated your enthusiasm for my mouth on your body.”

He straightens and lifts his hand and runs his fingers over my lips.

“Taste yourself.”

My lips part without hesitation, tongue swirling around the wetness coating his fingers. He groans and leans forward to replace his fingers with his mouth. The kiss is rough and desperate and leaves us both breathless.

I wrap my arms around his neck and rest my forehead against his. “Do you really think we’re two halves of a

whole?”

“Yes.”

Old pain and fears creep up. “You hated me so much. You made me hate you back.”

“I wanted you to want me with the same obsession I had for you. Whenever you looked at another guy, I wanted to kill him.”

“You didn’t act like it.”

“I couldn’t let you know what you were doing to me. The only time I could was when we were alone in the dark.” He nips at my earlobe.

The dart of pain sends a shiver down my spine. “When you were Sin.”

“I can give you everything you want. You know I can.”

“Eli—”

“Give me another chance. Give *us* another chance.”

I pull back until I’m staring into his face. “I—”

“You won’t ever find what we have with anyone else.”

My heart races wildly in my chest.

“I want you,” he continues softly. “In my bed. At my side. I want to be the reason you smile. I want to make you moan, make you feel safe. I want to be the memories that get you off when we’re apart.”

“But I live in Los Angeles.” It’s the only thing I can think of to say. “And you live in a cabin in the woods.”

He brushes his mouth over mine. “Distance doesn’t matter.”

I bury my face in his shoulder, a combination of old fears and worries fight with the knowledge that we’re older now, and there has to be more to a relationship than just sex ... *good* sex.

“Let’s see how this week goes?”

I wait for Eli to get angry at my words, but his hand strokes down my back.

“Whatever you want, Kitten. I’m not asking you to rush into anything. I just want you to know what I want.” He untangles himself from my arms. “You better get dressed before someone walks in.”

And just like that, I’m falling in love with him all over again.

CHAPTER 76

ELI

We go back to the cafeteria, where Miles, Ivan and Garrett are already seated at the table. The coffee in front of Kellan's seat makes me smile. I catch Arabella's hand as she moves away to take a seat and pull her down onto my lap. She doesn't argue, dropping her head to rest against my shoulder.

"What did Black want?" Miles asks.

"Nothing I didn't expect." I tell him about the conversation we had.

"Do you think he's serious?" he says when I'm done.

"I have no reason to believe otherwise. My little Hellcat here wanted to fight him."

"*Fight* him?"

"I don't trust him," Arabella lifts her head to say, yawning around the words.

I chuckle. "Sleepy?"

"Little bit."

I press a kiss into her hair. "I think we're going to skip the afternoon tours. I'm going to take Ari back to the dorms for a nap. We'll come to your room around seven, okay? We'll order dinner when we get there."

Lifting Arabella off my lap, I stand and take her hand. She

leans into my side, her arm sliding around my waist. “Come on, Kitten.”

Our path is blocked by Lacy as we move toward the door. Her hard eyes flick to Arabella and then move to me.

“Why are you wasting your time with her?”

I arch an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize I had to explain myself to you.”

“You know she’s not in our league, Eli. You need someone with blood like yours, who was raised with money. She’s a cheap imitation.”

“You understand we’re not actually *back* in high school, right? Grow up, Lacy. You’re married with kids. You’re not an eighteen-year-old girl anymore. Just because we’re standing in the halls of the school we attended doesn’t mean you need to revert to behaving like the bitch you were back then.”

Her face turns red, and her lips thin. “What does she have that I don’t? I don’t get it. She never fit in, yet you always came when she called.”

“I think we both have very different memories of that time, but I can answer your question. What does she have that you don’t? The answer to that is simple. *Everything*. Back then, she was everything I didn’t know I wanted, and now she’s everything I need.” I guide Arabella past her, then stop and turn. “If you want some advice. Stop living in the past. You’re not a cheerleader any longer. You’re a mother and have responsibilities. Stop chasing what you can’t have and work

on what you do have. Maybe then, one day, you'll be happy."

I leave her, mouth gaping, and walk out with Arabella beside me.

"Did you mean that?" Her voice is soft. "About me."

"I meant it. I meant all of it."

I hold the door open to the dorm building and let her go in front of me. She's silent on the walk up to my floor. I don't even think about taking her up to her room, guiding her out and down the hallway to my room. When we go inside, I wave at the bed.

"Go and lie down. You look ready to collapse where you stand."

The fact she doesn't argue tells me I'm not wrong.

"Afternoon orgasms wear you out, I should make a note of that somewhere."

She throws me a glare but curls up on the center of my bed. "What are you going to do?"

"Worried I'm going to force myself onto you?"

"No."

"Worried I won't?" I hike an eyebrow and she laughs.

"Come and lay down with me." She pats the mattress beside her. "Set an alarm so we don't oversleep." A yawn breaks up the words.

I set an alarm for six, then stretch out beside her. She scoots

closer so she can rest her head against my chest. I stroke a hand over her spine.

“I can hear your heart.” Her voice is already drowsy.

“I’m not a vampire, after all. Shocker.”

She huffs a laugh and burrows closer. “Don’t be an ass.”

She falls quiet, and I think she’s fallen asleep, but then she speaks again.

“Can I stay here with you tonight? I don’t feel comfortable up in my room.”

“You can stay with me whenever you want.”

“Do you think they’ll definitely reopen the school?”

“I think they’ve already made the decision. Us coming here won’t change that. They just want our blessing to make it easier and it’ll give them positive publicity.”

“I don’t like it.”

“After Friday, you won’t ever have to come here again. You could leave right now if you wanted, too. No one is forcing us to stay. We’re not schoolkids anymore, Kitten.”

“No, but I feel like we *have* to see it through to the end.”

I nod, rubbing my cheek against the top of her head. I know what she means. I feel the same way.

“Go to sleep, Ari. We’ll figure it all out later.”

CHAPTER 77

ARABELLA

“Ready?” Eli asks, holding his hand out to me from where he stands beside the door.

I move away from the bed, take his hand in mine, and lift it to brush my lips over his knuckles. “I’m not sure any of us are.”

“We need to know what happened that day.”

“I know.”

He draws me against the hard length of his body. “It’s going to be painful for all of us, but in the end, I think it will answer some questions and help us move on.”

Every instinct within me is telling me to run away and not relive one of the worst moments of my life. The only thing that stops is the fact Eli wants to go through it all. He needs to know what Miles saw. Events that I’m not even sure my best friend should remember when I know it’s still haunting him.

“You can always stay here.”

I tighten my hold on his hand. “You’re not leaving me behind.”

He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “You’re going to have to let Miles talk. I can already see the wheels in your head turning. I know it’s going to hurt him to talk about what happened, but I need to hear it. *He* needs to face it.”

“When did you turn into a therapist?”

“That’s why we came, isn’t it? We’re supposed to be here to heal, right?”

“I thought you came because you didn’t want me to be alone here.”

He drops a kiss on the end of my nose. “I did, but now I’m here I need to deal with everything. We need to find some peace with the past, so we can look to the future.”

I don’t reply, my stomach twisting at his words. *The future?* After all the trauma and damage we’ve been carrying around, can we have one? As much as I love Eli, I’m frightened that things between us won’t work. That our entire relationship is rooted in something that *can’t* be fixed.

Maybe this place feeds my memories and anxiety, but I can’t look forward while we’re inside these walls. The school is like a living and breathing entity, watching our every move.

He opens the door, and we walk into the hallway, and down to a room at the other end. He knocks, and a second later, Ivan lets us in. Garrett is already there, sitting on the edge of one bed while Miles is on the other.

“You came.”

“I told you I would. I need to know what happened as much as the rest of you,” Garrett replies. “I wasn’t close to Kellan, like the rest of you were, so if this talk triggers any of you, I can help Ivan guide you back to us.”

I release Eli's hand. "Do you think that's going to happen?"

He shrugs. "PTSD can hit at any time."

He takes a seat on the edge of the mattress beside Garrett. "Let's call and order food first."

Ivan nods, his phone already in his hand. "Tell me what you all want, and I'll do that now."

The thought of food makes me feel nauseous. Nerves swarm my stomach like angry bees. When it becomes clear that I'm not the only one who doesn't know what to choose, Ivan picks for us and arranges everything with quiet efficiency. When he's done, he joins his fiancé on the bed.

"Where do you want me to start?" Miles asks.

"At the beginning. When were you taken?" Eli's voice is just as low.

Miles swallows hard and closes his eyes. "Kellan booked a hotel. We were going to take his car, but I wanted it to be a proper date. I insisted we should arrive separately, make a big deal of meeting up at the hotel bar. Make it fun."

The memory of Kellan spooning Miles on his bed in Eli's dorm room fills my mind. How they'd kissed and made their plans while I'd been wrapped in Eli's arms across the room. A moment of happiness that hadn't lasted long enough.

Ivan takes Miles' hand and caresses his wrist with his thumb. "Take your time."

Miles stares down at their combined hands for a second

before answering. "It's my fault he's dead."

"No, it's not." Eli leans forward, forearms resting on his knees and hands hanging loosely.

"We should have driven to town together."

"Miles—"

My best friend raises his head, his eyes awash with tears and pain. "Evan used my cell to get Kellan to the chapel. He ... he told him I had something to tell him."

Eli's shoulders stiffen.

Is he remembering the text he'd gotten from Kellan too? The one that led him to the chapel where he'd found his friend lifeless and sprawled out like a dark sacrifice?

"How did Evan get your cell?"

Miles' eyes drop from Eli's and his shoulders move as he sighs.

"How did he get you to the chapel?" Garrett's voice is steady and calm. I know what Garrett is doing. He's asking the same question Eli asked, just in a different way.

Sucking in a breath, Miles wipes at his eyes with his free hand, but the tears keep leaking. "I was leaving my room. Someone hit me from behind. I woke up gagged and bound by the wall near the altar."

Ivan frowns. "How is that possible? No one saw you being snatched? The hallway might have been quiet, but someone

would have seen you being carried from the building into the woods.”

My attention flicks to Eli, and he nods.

“Not unless they took the tunnels,” I tell the older man. “The school is supposed to be riddled with them. It’s a secret not many people know about.”

Garrett glances between Eli and me. “You know about them?”

“I thought I knew about all of them.” Eli’s voice is grim.

“Evan knew about more.” I squeeze myself tightly, still standing in the middle of the room, fighting back memories that threaten to overwhelm me. “He admitted as much when he kidnapped me.”

“Kellan came into the chapel, and he was smiling. He looked so happy.” Miles’ expression is twisted with anguish, eyes glassy and distant as the tears drip off his chin. “I tried to warn him, but Evan got to him first. They argued. Evan kept saying that Kellan was in the way. That he wasn’t playing the game in the right way. That Arabella was supposed to be the one to fall. And then he just ... threw himself toward Kellan.”

I was supposed to fall? To die?

I cover my mouth with my hand at his words. “Oh my god.”

Garrett shakes his head, warning me to keep quiet.

Miles crumples weakly sideways into his fiancé’s chest, who comforts him with soft, crooning words.

“I’m here. I know how hard this is for you, *Luchik*. I am so proud of you. Let me be your anchor.”

Miles smiles through the tears pouring down his face. “You have been my anchor for longer than you know.”

Tears prick my eyes, but I blink fast to hold them back. The love I can see between them makes my chest ache.

“I don’t think Kellan realized Evan had a knife. He shoved Evan away, and then they were wrestling with each other. Fighting to get the upper hand ... and then Kellan just ... he just staggered back and touched his chest. He looked at me and frowned. His hands were red ... so red ... and then he fell ...” He swallows. “Kellan...he was looking at me the whole time.” Miles’ voice breaks with a sob. “While.... while he was bleeding out.”

Eli closes his eyes, but he’s not quick enough to hide the torment swirling in the green depths. This is ripping him apart all over again.

“I kept fighting to get free, but the ro-rope cut my wrists.” Miles’ hand moves to touch his left one. “I couldn’t hel-help him. I couldn’t stop Evan. Kel-Kellan kept telling me that it w-was okay. That ev-everything was going to be okay. His last words were to tell me that you would come.” His gaze lifts to Eli. “That you wouldn’t let him get away with it. I watched him d-die. I watched the light of life fade out of the eyes of the boy I loved, and it’s haunted me every night since.”

CHAPTER 78

ELI

Miles falls silent, the only sound in the room that of his sniffs as he cries quietly against Ivan's shoulder. Arabella touches my arm, and my gaze snaps to her.

"We should go," she says. "We can come and collect our food when it arrives."

I shake my head. As much as Miles is upset, we're not done. He hasn't told me everything.

"You said they argued. What about?" A detached part of me notes how emotionless I sound.

"Eli!" Arabella gasps my name.

Miles sniffs and lifts his head. "I don't know. Kellan was telling Evan that he'd gone too far, and then the next thing I knew Evan was screaming about a fallen knight. He launched himself at Kellan. I don't even remember seeing a knife."

"How did he end up on the altar? He wasn't on the floor when I arrived."

"Evan put him on there."

"Was Kellan alive when Evan moved him?"

Miles pauses to think. "Yes. He ... Kellan turned to look at me once he was on the altar and that's when he kept telling me everything would be okay."

I shake my head. “That doesn’t make sense.” There’s something wrong with how Miles is describing things. “Are you *sure* Evan put him on the altar?”

“Yes. How else would he get there?”

“Evan and Kellan were similar sizes. There’s no way Evan could get him up there without a struggle, not if Kellan was conscious. Are you *sure* Evan was alone?”

Miles doesn’t reply.

“Miles!” I snap his name and he flinches. “Answer the question. Are you *sure*?”

He shakes his head. I stand and cross over to him. “Miles, answer the fucking question.”

“I don’t ... I don’t know.”

“You fucking *do* know. Think!” I reach out and shake him.

Ivan shoves me away. “Eli, stop.”

“Shut the fuck up. Miles, look at me.” I pause, waiting. When he doesn’t turn his head, I let out a frustrated half-growl. “Man the fuck up and *look* at me.”

His head slowly turns, eyes meeting mine.

“Think back. Was Evan alone?”

His throat moves as he swallows. His tongue comes out to wet his lips and then his eyes widen.

“No.” His voice is quiet. “Oh my god, *no*. No ... he wasn’t alone.” Untangling himself from Ivan’s arms, he pushes to his

feet. “Eli, he *wasn't* alone! Why didn't I remember that?”

“It doesn't matter. You do now. Think about it. Do you know who it was?”

He shakes his head. “No. I didn't see their face. They kept their back to me. They only came out after Kellan fell. But ... I'm sure it was a girl.”

We stare at each other and I'm sure he can see my face has the same expression *I* can see burning in his eyes.

Evan wasn't working alone. And that meant whoever had been helping him back then is possibly here in the school with us now.

CHAPTER 79

ARABELLA

My worry over Eli acting so emotionlessly is thrown into disarray with Miles' revelation. Evan wasn't working alone. The knowledge beats through my head over and over at a sickening tempo.

"Who?" I demand. "Who was it?"

Miles shakes his head. "I ... I don't know."

"What color was her hair?"

"She was wearing a hoodie ... I *don't* know."

"Did you hear her voice?" Eli grabs his shoulder. "You must have recognized something."

Miles flinches under his touch. "No."

"*Think!*"

Ivan stands and pushes Eli back, putting himself in front of his fiancé. "Leave him alone."

Eli's features contort with frustration. "He has to know more."

"I *don't*." Miles scrubs a hand over his face.

Garrett rises from his perch on the other bed. "We all need to stay calm."

I spin toward him in disbelief. "*Calm?* Evan's accomplice

could be roaming the halls of Churchill Bradley Academy with us. Do you have any idea how fucked up that is?”

“It doesn’t mean it was someone we know!” He frowns. “There were over a hundred and—”

“Bullshit!” I snarl. “*You* know, just as well as I do, it had to be someone close to him ... and *that* means it’s one of his friends.”

“We can’t go throwing wild accusations around. Not without proof,” Ivan says, still keeping Eli from reaching the man behind him.

“And where are we going to get that?” Eli’s voice is flat.

I hate how he seems to have just shut down to cope. “Maybe we can flush them out somehow. They could still be holding a grudge.”

Garrett gapes at me. “You mean *bait* them?”

“Yes.”

“They’re an accomplice to *murder*, Bella! Do you understand how dangerous it could be? This isn’t a game.”

“If we’re careful, no one will get hurt.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Kellan *died* because he confronted Evan. And now you plan to pull the tiger’s tail and see if she goes after you, if she believes you know of her involvement with Evan Ridley?”

“Garrett is right.” Ivan says. “It’s too dangerous.”

Eli rakes a hand through his hair. “We have the perfect opportunity to bring Evan’s accomplice to justice.”

“At the risk of your own lives,” the Russian continues, his voice calm. “It’s been ten years. If she was going to do something, surely she would have by now. Miles should inform the police of what he knows and let them handle it.”

The need to hunt down whoever it is quiets at his suggestion, and I turn to Eli. “As much as I hate it, they’re right. We can’t risk our lives.”

Eli’s tongue flicks out to play with his lip ring. “Fine.”

Garrett eyes him. “Eli—”

“I said *fine*.”

A knock at the door interrupts us, and we all fall silent.

“That will be our food.” Ivan moves across the room to open the door, which reveals one of the security guards carrying takeout boxes.

“We’ll take ours back to our room.” Eli doesn’t wait for me and stalks out.

I give the others an uneasy glance. “I’m going to go with him and make sure he’s okay.”

I collect our dinner and drinks and take them back to his room. He kicks the door shut. I place the boxes on the table and unpack them.

I’m aware of him prowling the length of the room like a

caged animal, while I prepare everything, and only turn to him when I'm done. "Eli, you need to sit and eat."

He doesn't stop pacing. "I'm not hungry."

The more I stare at him, the more I see the angry eighteen-year-old boy from all those years ago. When his path takes him past me, I walk up behind him, wrap my arms around his waist, and press my cheek to his back.

He stills.

"Miles must have shut the memory down," I whisper, hugging him tightly. "It's not his—"

"I *know* it's not his fault, Ari."

"I was worried you might blame him for not remembering before. "

"No, I know he's a victim too."

"He never told me about what happened that day," I wish I could soak in some of his pain, so he doesn't have to carry it alone. "I never asked because I didn't want to hurt him with the memories."

Eli untangles my arms from around him and turns. "After what he told us, I'm not surprised he repressed it all. But I *need* to know who it is, Ari."

Raising my chin, I meet the anguish combined with anger brimming in his eyes. "I know."

"This is fucking with my head." There's an edge to his

voice. “Whoever it is, they helped that bastard kill my best friend.”

I run a finger across his jawline. The look on his face is so real and raw, the darkness he struggles with so close to the surface. No matter what I say, it isn't going to change his mind. He needs answers, no matter where it leads him. This week might be the only opportunity he gets to learn the truth.

I'd promised him I would be whatever he needed, and I won't break that vow. Not now. Not even if it means facing the ghosts in our past one more time.

CHAPTER 80

ELI

I can't even begin to describe the intensity of the emotion swirling through me. I knew that listening to Miles relive the last moments of Kellan's life would be difficult, but I hadn't expected to feel such fucking ... *anger* at my friend for doing something so stupid. Why the fuck, just once, couldn't he have thought about the implications of what could happen? He'd *known* whoever was fucking with Arabella was dangerous. We'd agreed not to go anywhere alone. So, what does he do? Jaunts off to the fucking chapel without telling anyone.

So did you, asshole.

I ignore the reminder that I'd dropped everything because of the text I thought was from Kellan, and also gone to the chapel alone.

I want to break something, and I have to fight to contain the desire to lash out, to take out my fury on the only available person I can see. Instead, I redirect it, backing Arabella against the closest wall and attacking her mouth with all the pent-up rage clawing its way through my body.

Her lips are soft, sweet, parting beneath the onslaught of my teeth and tongue willingly. Her lack of fight frustrates me. I pull my mouth from hers.

"Fight me." I growl the words.

“No.” She loops her arms around my neck and tries to pull my head back down.

“I need you to fight me.” I can’t explain it. My nerves are on fire with the need to hurt someone.

“I’m not going to fight you.” The determination in her eyes makes me grind my teeth.

She rises on her toes and presses her lips to my jaw. “We have food, so you need to feed me,” she whispers.

Her lips move to the corner of my mouth. “*Then* you can fuck me.” She draws back and smiles up at me. “And after that, if you really need to, I’ll let you fight me.”

Feed me. Fuck me. Fight me.

It had been something of a mantra between us all those years ago. When we were battling how we felt about each other.

I hold her gaze with mine, then slowly nod.

“Alright.” My voice is just as soft as hers.

The desire to lash out is still there, but whatever magic this woman holds over me has dampened the need to a low simmer. Her fingers toy with the hair at the nape of my neck, her eyes tracking over my face. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but she must find it because she gives a nod of her own and lets her arms drop. Her hand finds mine and she draws me across the room to the small table.

Before we can sit down to eat, there’s a tap on my door.

Both our heads swing around to look at it.

There's absolutely no reason we should be worried about who it is, but I'm immediately on edge. Trading looks with Arabella, I can see the same agitation in her eyes.

"Stay here," I tell her, my voice low, and move across to the door. "Who is it?"

"Brad." The deep voice that replies surprises me.

I pull the door open. "What the fuck do you want?"

The man standing in the hallway is wearing sweats and a t-shirt, hands shoved deep into his pockets, and a frown furrowing his brow. Lacy hovers behind him.

"Can we come in?" He steps forward, and I move to block his progress.

"No."

His shoulders sag and he sighs. "Look, man. I know I was an asshole while we were at school, but—"

"Let me guess. You want to apologize. You feel bad about everything that happened."

He shuffles from foot to foot. "Something like that."

"Why bother?"

His head snaps up. "What?"

"Come on, Brad. What's the fucking point? Once we leave here, we're never going to see each other again. I doubt you gave me or what happened during senior year a single fucking

thought over the past ten years.”

“That’s not true.”

I snort.

“I mean it. I know Kellan was your friend, Eli, but what happened that night ... that entire *year* ... affected everyone.”

My gaze shifts from him to the woman behind him. “Is that right? Because from where I’m standing, it didn’t seem to affect your wife very much. She appears to be really into the idea of picking up where she left off.”

Lacy turns red.

Brad rubs his palm over the top of his head. “She told me what happened earlier.”

“And you’re okay with her wanting to fuck someone else?”
I hike an eyebrow.

“She got caught up in being back here, with the other girls.”

That makes me laugh. “Are you so fucking pussywhipped that you really believe that? Jesus fucking Christ. The girl was opening her legs for everyone when you weren’t looking when we were students here. Do you really think that changed when you left?”

“No.” He licks his lips. “I knew what she was doing.” He glances left and right. “Look, Eli, we were stupid kids. Everything was a game. The tormenting, the bullying, the constant one upmanship. Evan fed into our egos. Pointed out the things we hated most about ourselves in those around us

and made them physical targets for our self-hatred.” He reaches back for Lacy’s hand and pulls her forward. “Evan wanted Lacy to get close to you. He wanted you to fall in love with her.”

“And you were happy to stand by and watch that happen? How fucking weak are you?”

“I was a kid. I was seeing how everyone around me got treated if they didn’t follow what Evan wanted. All the kids over the years who were ostracized from our group. It wasn’t until later that I really saw the pattern. But anytime someone went against what Evan wanted, they became the enemy and a target.” He shakes his head. “It sounds so fucking lame now, but at the time ... Eli, you have to understand how much fucking pressure we were all under to conform, to meet expectations.”

I don’t say a word.

“Okay, maybe you don’t. You never did try to be a part of the crowd. You always stood out. I think that’s why he hated you so much.”

I prop my shoulder against the doorframe. “Can we get to the point of why you’re here?”

“You’re right. I wanted to apologize for mine *and* Lacy’s behavior.”

“Your wife can’t speak for herself?”

Lacy glares at me.

“Don’t think she agrees with you.” I let a smirk pull my lips up.

“That’s because she still wants to suck your dick.” His voice is so matter of fact that it takes a minute for what he’s saying to sink in. “And, if that’s what it takes for you to accept our apology, then I’m here to give her permission.”

“You ... what the fuck, Brad?”

He shrugs. “I guess if something happens enough times, you find a way to enjoy it. If you want her to suck your dick, I won’t stop her. I wouldn’t mind watching though.”

My gaze goes from him to Lacy and back again. “You seriously came here to offer me your wife’s services?”

There’s a noise behind me, and Arabella pushes past. I catch a glimpse of blazing blue eyes and then she’s in Lacy’s face.

“You stay the fuck away from Eli. He doesn’t need your *skanky* mouth anywhere fucking near him. You understand me?”

CHAPTER 81

ARABELLA

Lacy's expression twists. "What is *she* doing in your room?"

I step into her line of sight, blocking her view of Eli. "Don't look at him. You look at me."

"We're not here for *you*."

The control on my anger unravels, and my patience snaps. "Well guess what? Surprise, I'm here, and I'm not fucking moving."

She huffs and rolls her eyes. "Why do you always have to be in the way?"

I take a step toward her. "Keep rolling your eyes, bitch. You might just find a brain back there."

Brad straightens. "Don't speak to my wife like that."

I hold up my finger to silence him. "When I'm talking to you, *Brad*, you'll know."

The ex-cheerleader raises her chin and glares at me. "This is between Eli and me. Unfinished business."

"You don't have any unfinished fucking business with him." I smile. "Eli is *mine*. So why don't you fuck off?"

Lacy sweeps me from head to toe with one of her classic venomous looks. In the past, I would have backed down, not wanting to cause a scene. Today it only incites my anger more.

“I don’t see his ring on your finger.”

“And because of that, you thought you’d come on over here and offer yourself to him? What was your plan ... to talk him into a threesome?”

Brad’s cheeks flush with color. “Well, I—”

“Fuck, no,” Eli mutters from behind me. “I’d rather gouge my eyes out with a spoon.”

I struggle not to laugh at the comical expressions of fury and embarrassment rippling over the couple’s expressions at Eli’s words. They *really* thought they had a chance to seduce him into bed? How delusional are they?

“Eli,” Lacy whines. “Remember how I made you feel good? How you groaned when I sucked you off. You couldn’t get enough of my mouth wrapped around your cock. You said I was the best you’d ever had.”

I glance at the man behind me.

“What? I was seventeen and wanted to get off.” He shrugs. “She gave me a blow job once. If she’d really been any good at it, I might have gone back for more.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “*Seriously?*”

“Kitten, this was way before you started at the school.” His lips tilt. “Are you jealous, Hellcat?”

“Of *her*? I don’t fucking think so.” I am. Jealousy is eating me alive.

“Oh please, like you’re such a saint, Arabella Gray. If I remember correctly, you spread your legs for a couple of masked boys and let them record you. How much of a dumb bitch can you be? You were more of a whore for dick than I was.”

At her words the molten anger within me solidifies into a hard ball within my chest.

Who the fuck does she think she’s talking to?

I’m not an insecure, shy eighteen-year-old anymore. I’m a strong, capable grown-ass woman who refuses to be intimidated by bullies.

“I’ve been called worse by better.”

Lacy sneers. “If your mother hadn’t married Eli’s father, you’d still be in the dumpster in Hicksville, making money as a second-rate hooker.”

I fight the desire to punch her. “Your ass must be jealous of all the shit that comes out of your mouth.”

“You will *never* be one of us, Arabella.”

“Is that supposed to be an insult because I see it as a blessing?”

Brad touches his wife’s hand. “Baby, maybe we should go.”

Snatching her arm away, she tosses her hair back over her shoulder. “Go grow some balls. This little bitch is not standing in the way of what I want.”

Brad's face flushes, deepening when he catches my pitying look, before glancing nervously at the floor.

“Go back to your room, Lacy.” My voice is cool.

She shakes her head. “Why don't you return to yours?”

There's a deafening silence for a split second. I'm not even sure which one of us moves first. She lunges forward and grabs my shoulder. As she shoves me into the side of the door, I seize a fistful of her hair. Lacy's high-pitched screams ring in my ears, and they fuel the pent-up emotions I've been carrying for all these years—the hate toward this woman who had pretended to be my friend.

I embrace the tension and adrenaline rushing through my body. Nails bite into my shoulders and claw at my neck. I yank her head down and bring my knee up and ram it into her stomach. She makes a pained sound, but it doesn't slow her down. A fist to my ribs makes me grunt, and we stumble together across the hallway.

“I'm going to fuck you up.” Lacy goes for my face, her nails dragging against my cheek.

I bring my arm back and punch her hard. “Bring it, bitch.”

I'm not even sure how we end up on the floor. The woman I'm pinning tries to buck me off as we fight. I punch her again, this time in the face.

Blood explodes out of her nose. Shrieking like a demented banshee, she goes for my eyes, but I turn my head away. Pain

sears my right cheek. My fury escalates until all I see is red. I swing for her again, but arms wrap around my waist and haul me up. Kicking and snapping, I fight to get to her again.

Lacy crawls up onto her hands and knees, blood pouring from her nose. Baring her teeth, she lunges at me with a hiss.

Brad grabs his wife from behind. "Baby, enough."

"I think she broke my nose." Lacy doesn't stop fighting him, her eyes burning with hate. "She hit me. She fucking hit me."

"Ari, calm down." Eli's voice is close to my ear.

"I'll break more than her fucking nose if she ever dares to talk to you again." I spit the warning. "You hear me, Lacy? I'll be watching you."

"I suggest you get your wife out of here," Eli tells Brad. "And don't even fucking try to come near either of us again."

With that, he hauls me back into the room and kicks the door shut behind us. The second he lets me go, I stalk across to the bathroom.

"I can't believe them. Did they think you were going to say yes? They must be out of their minds."

I'm shaking with the force of my anger. Adrenaline is still pumping through me. A quick glance in the mirror shows me four red bleeding scratch marks down my right cheek.

I touch the wounds gently and wince at the sting. "She better not try anything else while we're here. I swear I won't be responsible for my actions."

Eli doesn't reply.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I find him in the middle of the room.

My brows lift. "What?"

He's staring at me, eyes blazing with an emotion I can't define.

"That's the second time you've staked your claim on me today, Hellcat."

CHAPTER 82

ELI

She scowls at me, fury still spitting from her eyes. If she was truly a cat, her fur would be up on end and her claws out. I can visualize the angry wag of her tail as she stalks toward me. My fingers itch with the desire to set the image down on paper.

“What are you talking about?”

“First Jace, now Lacy and Brad.” I reach out to twist a lock of blonde hair around my finger. “Be careful. I might start to think you care about me.”

Her frown deepens. “I *do* care about you. You know that already.”

“Enough to stop another woman from getting close to me.” I use my grip on her hair to draw her closer to me. I want to stoke the flames higher, feel the heat of her anger.

“Do you *want* Lacy to—”

“Fuck no.”

“Then why are you complaining?”

“Sheath those claws, Kitten.” My lips curl up. “Unless you plan on making me bleed.” I lower my head to brush my lips over hers. “Maybe you should ... to drive home your claim.”

“Maybe I should *what?*” There’s still a bite to her tone.

There’s clearly something wrong with me because it turns

my dick to stone.

“Draw blood. Make me bleed. Own your words.” My tongue flicks out to lick over her lips.

“Own my words ...”

“You said I’m yours.”

“I was making a point,” she snaps.

“I noticed that.” I deadpan.

Her eyes narrow. “Are you *mocking* me?”

“Will you attack me the way you attacked Lacy if I am?” I kiss my way across her cheek to her ear. “Will you make me bleed, Hellcat?” My teeth find the lobe of her ear and I bite down gently. “Do you want to claw at me? Drag your nails down my back until I beg for mercy?” I lick my way down her throat.

“Is that what *she* did?” She reaches up to tangle her fingers in the hair at the back of my head and pulls my mouth away from her throat. “Did *she* claw at you?”

“Never. I’ve only ever let one woman mark me.”

“*Who?*” Her fingers tighten, her eyes sparking with heat, and fool that I am, I want to fucking burn in her fire.

I smile, and run my tongue over my lips, pausing at my piercing to toy with it. Her eyes follow the move, her tongue mimicking mine as it moves across her own lips.

“Jealous, Hellcat? Don’t like the thought of someone else

with their claws in me?”

“Who is it?” Her voice is fierce.

I laugh.

“Fuck you, Eli.” Her hand drops and she spins away.

I catch her arm and pull her back. “I wish you would.”

“Would what?”

“Fuck me.” Wrapping my arm around her waist, I drag her against me and lower my head until my lips hover above hers. “Mark me like you own me. Bite me like you’re hungry for me.” I kiss her, hard and fast. “Fuck me like you hate me, Ari.”

The words are a catalyst, and she grabs my face between her hands, lips twisting into a wordless snarl. Her mouth attacks mine with a feral heat, teeth snapping and biting, and a coppery taste hits my tongue seconds after a sting to my bottom lip tells me she’s drawn blood. Her lips close over mine, tongue lapping at the tiny wound, and she makes a sound in her throat, low and guttural.

Her hands move from my face to slam against my chest, sliding down until she reaches the hem of my shirt and then work their way back up beneath the material and over my ribs.

Tongues dueling, fighting for dominance, she shoves me back a step and then another until my legs hit the bed. Another push to my chest and I drop down onto the mattress. She doesn’t let up, crawling over my legs to straddle my hips, her

mouth never leaving mine.

I push my fingers beneath her top and slide my palms up her back, pressing her closer into my body.

“Take it off.” She tears her mouth from mine long enough to make her demand.

“Take what off?”

“Your shirt.”

“Take *your* shirt off.”

Her nails dig into my chest at my reply, and I laugh, the sound a little ragged around the edges. Fisting the back of her top, I pull it up. Her arms lift so I can drag it off, over her head, leaving her in jeans and a bra.

“Tell me who she is.”

“Who?” I press kisses along her shoulder, down her chest and along the edge of the lacy bra.

“The woman you let mark you.”

“Tell me you’re jealous.”

“Fuck you.”

I nudge the material away with my nose and lick over her nipple.

“You will. As soon as I get your jeans off.” Her back arches and I drag my teeth over the hard little tip before sucking it into my mouth.

“I’m going to bury my dick so deep into your pussy that you won’t know where you end and I begin.” I unhook her bra and toss it to one side, then twist, tumbling her to the bed and leaning over her.

My fingers find the button on her jeans, and I pop it open so I can drag the denim down her legs. She doesn’t stop me, lying on her back and watching me out of dark blue eyes. When I have her naked, I prop myself up on one hand and look down at her.

Her skin is slightly flushed, the tattoos covering her telling the tale of her senior year of school the same way mine do but only for those who know what to look for. I run my palm over her from shoulder to hip, feeling her shiver beneath my touch.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I kiss my way down her body, my tongue licking a path over her breasts, around each nipple, down her ribs, circling her navel, until I can settle between her thighs.

One hand drifts down to thread through my hair, and I lift my head to smile up her body. Holding her gaze, I press a kiss to her pussy.

“The only woman I’ve ever let me mark me, Hellcat ...” My tongue finds its way to her clit, and I take a long, leisurely lick, bringing her hips up off the bed. “... is you. My body, and my soul. Your claws are embedded too deep into me, Kitten. If you remove them, it might just kill me.”

“Eli...” My name is a sigh of pleasure as I bury my face

between her thighs and feast on her clit like it's the final meal
I'll ever have.

CHAPTER 83

ARABELLA

I close my eyes, my heart crashing wildly in my chest. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him I love him. That the thought of another woman touching him drives me to violence. I know it's not rational, but I don't care. It's primal. A need I can't fight against. But instead of admitting it, I swallow down the messy, chaotic emotions before they spill out.

I moan as his tongue toys with my clit. "You drive me crazy, Eli Travers."

He chuckles. "That's something, at least."

"Give me an orgasm."

"Is that a demand?" His hot breath skates over my inner thigh, and I shiver.

Tightening my grip on his hair, I tug his face back to where I need it. "Yes."

"Dare I refuse?" He sucks, teases, *licks* my clit, one hand pressing on my stomach to hold me in place while I writhe against his mouth.

"Yes. Yes. Yes." I don't have the brain capacity for any other word.

Pressure builds low in my groin, grows stronger, more intense, until orgasm hits. My grip on his hair loosens, and I'm sure if he let me go, I'd float away.

Eli kneels on the mattress between my spread legs. His eyes glitter down at me as he strips off his t-shirt and tosses it on the floor. Unbuttoning his jeans, he pushes them off and they join the t-shirt.

I beckon to him with a curl of my finger. “Tell me you want me.”

“I want you.” He crawls up my body.

I run my palms over his chest and shoulders, the muscles beneath smooth tattooed flesh, hard and tense. His weight settles on top of me, and I wrap my legs around his waist. Our mouths meet in a hot and hungry kiss. I rake my nails down his back to the curve of his ass. Eli groans into my mouth.

“Ready to beg for mercy?” I whisper.

“Never.”

“Do you really want my scratches all over you?”

“I’ll wear them as badges of honor.”

I press my mouth against the tattoo on his throat, where he’s captured my marks in ink. I nip and suck at his skin, “Then I’ll leave them where people can see them.”

“Bite me. Claw me.” He pushes his cock against my pussy, taking possession of my body in one steady stroke. “Fuck me.”

The mind-stealing feel of him inside me drives my desire to fever-pitch. As he moves over and within me, I sink my teeth into the top of his shoulder. Eli swears and deepens his thrusts, slamming into me over and over.

I dig my nails into his hips, giving him the pain he demanded from me. I want him to hurt. I want him to feel as desperate for me as I am for him. I need him to feel this madness burning through my blood, which only he has ever evoked.

The frantic lust possessing us is volatile and doesn't take much to explode. My orgasm hits, and his release follows a moment after. Panting and gasping, I fight to catch my breath as we lay tangled together on the bed. Our heartbeats merge, slowing to a calmer tempo, and I smile, high on languid post-sex bliss.

His mouth seeks out mine, and he kisses me.

"I think that's the fastest fuck we've ever had."

"Don't worry. I'm not done with you yet." I trail a finger along his bicep. "But our food is going to be cold."

Eli rolls off me and tucks me into his side. "Who cares? I'll order some more."

"I could get used to this."

"Sex, my undivided attention, or ordering food?"

I nip playfully at his skin. "All of it. If you're not careful, I could get addicted."

He traces the shape of my mouth with his finger. "Then I need to get you hooked."

Warmth flames to life inside me at his words. I kiss my way down his abs. He watches me with heavy-lidded eyes and one

hand tucked under his head.

I slide my mouth over the semi-hard length of his cock, gently grazing my teeth lightly over the velvety smoothness.

“You tried to make me jealous.”

“I did.”

I narrow my eyes. “That wasn’t nice.”

“I kinda liked how feisty you got.”

“Hmmm.”

“Kitten, you’ve never had anything to be jealous about.” His voice is raspy. “So don’t get any ideas about biting off my dick.”

I curl my fingers around his shaft and lick the tip. “What happened to bite me, claw me, fuck me?”

Eli shudders. “That part of my anatomy isn’t included.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Don’t do it, Hellcat.”

“Scared?”

His lips twitch into an almost smile. “Arabella Gray, are you threatening me?”

I swallow his length down my throat in answer, and his cock hardens as I suck on it. Head bobbing up and down, I pleasure him with my mouth, expressing my feelings about him without words. But even as I lose myself in pleasing him, there’s still that horrible nagging worry about the future in the back of my

mind.

CHAPTER 84

ELI

The alarm on my cell wakes me, and I throw out a hand to grope around the nightstand until I can find it and silence the noise. Arabella rolls over, her leg sliding over mine until she's above me, straddling my hips. Her hair is a golden cloud, tumbling around her face and shoulders. Hands propped against my chest, she leans down to kiss me, then continues to climb across me and off the bed.

I lean up on one elbow, catching sight of her naked ass as she disappears into the bathroom.

“You know you could have just got out of your side of the bed.”

Her face appears around the door. “That wouldn't have been half as much fun.”

I laugh and drop back against the pillows. “But you've woken my dick up now, Hellcat.”

The sound of the shower running is my only reply. I toy briefly with the idea of joining her but decide against it. While I'm fully prepared to throw everything into the ring, I'm not sure she's on the same page as me yet. For all I know, this could just be a final fling before we both go our separate ways at the end of the week. There's a tightness in my chest at the thought of her walking away.

I throw back the covers and stand, dragging a hand through my hair to shove it away from my face.

Maybe I should get a haircut.

But then I remember the sharp sting of pain when she dragged her nails over my scalp, and the way she liked to tangle her fingers in my hair while I was making her come.

Maybe I should leave my hair the fuck alone.

I'm pulling on a pair of sweats when she comes back in the room, wrapped in a towel.

"Can I borrow a t-shirt? I don't really want to put the one I was wearing yesterday back on."

"What's mine is yours, Hellcat."

"Really?" She draws the word out, her eyes dropping to the front of my sweats.

"You can have that whenever you want it, too." I open one of the drawers in the dresser. "Take your pick."

She passes me and rummages through my clothes. "Do you have a hoodie I can use as well?"

"Isn't wearing my clothes giving me boyfriend status?"

She drops the towel and pulls one of my shirts over her head. It drops down, almost to her knees.

"I think the teeth marks all over your neck do that already." She comes toward me, hooks an arm around my neck and pulls my head down for a kiss.

I brush my fingers over her cheek, where Lacy had scratched her yesterday. “At least she didn’t leave a lasting impression on you, otherwise by your definition of ownership, you’re officially dating Lacy.”

She punches my arm. “Asshole.”

She drags on her jeans. I arch a brow at her lack of underwear.

“All my clothes are in my room.”

“Good point. You should just bring them down here.”

She stills. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“You own me now, remember? Wearing my clothes, branding my skin. No take backs, Ari.”

I wink and head into the bathroom to take a shower.

“Why don’t you go and sit down, and I’ll get breakfast?” Arabella waves at Miles and Ivan, who are already seated at our table.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Kellan used to get breakfast, so you didn’t have to mess around with money.”

“And everything is free this week. They’re wooing us, in the hopes we’ll give them our blessing to reopen the school.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Just go and sit down, Eli.”

“I don’t know. Give a girl just the tiniest hint that she might have a claim on you and what happens? She turns into a domineering Hellcat.”

She ignores my comment. “What do you want to eat?”

“Anything.”

She folds her arms and frowns at me. “Is that what Kellan used to do? Just pick up whatever he wanted, and you went along with it.”

“Pretty much. I’ll eat anything, as long as it comes with coffee.” I tweak a lock of her hair and drop a kiss to the tip of her nose. “I deserve a prize for not making that sound dirtier.” My next kiss is on the corner of her mouth. “Miles said food is your love language.” One side of my mouth curls up. “Do you love me, Hellcat?” I’m only half-teasing.

“I love the things your tongue can do to me. I need to make sure you keep your stamina levels up, so you can do it again.”

I’m still laughing when I take my seat beside Ivan. Miles points his spoon at me from across the table. “Looks like someone already had her breakfast.”

My hand lifts to touch my throat. “She was marking her territory.” I tell them both about the run-in with Brad and Lacy.

“That’s ... Wow, that’s fucked up,” Miles says when I fall silent. “They seriously wanted a threesome with you?”

“I’m not sure whether that was their intention or Lacy

wanted to fuck me while Brad watched. Ari was too busy trying to strangle Lacy for me to get the full details.”

“Oh my god, I did *not* try to strangle her!” Arabella slides the tray of food in front of me and takes the empty seat on my right.

“Baby, I had to drag you off her.” I wink at Miles. “She told Lacy I belong to her.” My voice is only a little smug.

The glare she nails me with would be more effective if her cheeks weren’t so red. I smile at her.

“What? That’s what you said. You can’t deny it. There were witnesses.”

“I was angry.”

I pick up my coffee and smirk over the rim. “You were jealous.”

Miles’ eyes dart from me to her, a smile spreading across his face.

“What are *you* grinning about?” she snaps, which only makes him smile harder.

“The pair of you are bickering like an old married couple.”

CHAPTER 85

ARABELLA

“No, we’re not.”

“Yes, you are.” Miles chuckles. “It’s cute.”

Eli grins behind his coffee cup. He doesn’t join me in denying Miles’ words, and I have to curb the urge to punch him in the arm.

Ivan’s gaze moves from my face to the hoodie I’m wearing. “You look good in his clothes.”

“You better watch out, Eli. She’s already stolen one of those.” Miles teases. “She’s always wearing it. I think she sleeps in it.”

My heart lodges in my throat. “It’s comfortable.”

“Just let me know which ones you’re thinking of claiming before you take them.” There’s no inflection in his tone. “As I said earlier, what’s mine is yours.”

I want you. I love you. God, I wish I could tell you that, but I’m too fucking scared of screwing this up.

I wrap my fingers around the handle of my cup. “I’ll do that.”

“When do you want to move your stuff into my room?”

“Wait, you’re moving in with him?” Miles jumps on his question.

“Just for the week. I don’t like being in my room. It has too many bad memories.”

Miles opens his mouth, but his attention shifts to something across the room. My gaze follows his, and lands on Brad and Lacy. The ex-cheerleader’s nose is swollen, and she has a black eye. She’s clinging to her husband’s arm.

I grit my teeth, recalling the hungry look in her eyes. It makes me want to take Eli somewhere far away, where I can lose myself in him like I had last night.

My anger simmers, but I keep it in check.

“You did that?” Miles’ eyebrows rise.

I shrug. “She started it. I think I’m going to go and make a start on my project.”

“Finish your breakfast first.” Eli taps the edge of my plate.

Snatching up the croissant, I scrape back my chair. “I’ll eat it on the way.”

I lean down, cup his jaw and capture his mouth with my own. His lips part, his tongue dancing along mine. My teeth graze his bottom lip gently before I pull away.

“I’ll see you later.”

He settles back in his chair, eyes gleaming as he smiles up at me. “I’ll be waiting. Possibly naked.”

The butterflies in my stomach do a backflip as I turn and walk away.

“Hey, wait up.” A moment later, Miles is beside me. “I thought I’d spend some time with you.”

“What about Ivan?”

“He said he has some business calls and a video meeting that he couldn’t rearrange.”

I open the top of the box, and push the tissue paper aside so I can carefully lift out the dress packed away inside.

“It seems so long ago. I spent weeks sketching what I wanted before I dared make a start.”

Miles’ brows lift. “Black?”

“I planned to make it white, and then...well, things changed.”

“Eli.”

I smile at the memory. “Yes, Eli.”

We’re alone in the little room, the other two women with projects have opted out of completing theirs. Their lives took a different turn, one that didn’t include dressmaking. Not that I’m complaining about it. I work better without distractions and, now that it’s in front of me, I’m itching to get started on it.

I examine the dress for damage, but it’s survived the last ten years. Someone has been thoughtful enough to store it in a cool, dark place. I drape it across the table in front of me,

where my old sketchbook is open on the design— a beautiful gothic ball gown. The cemetery in the woods and my melancholy, morbid mood, which had held sway over me most of my stay at the Academy, had inspired it.

I open the box wider to reveal silver and black brocade. Gathering the elegant fabric in my arms, I walk back to the table.

Miles reaches out to stroke the material as I lay it down. “That’s gorgeous.”

“Eli got it for me that Christmas as a gift.”

He grins. “So, about you and Eli.”

I roll my eyes. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“It doesn’t look that way from where I’m standing. You’re in his bed, wearing his clothes. You’ve branded him where everyone can see.”

“We’re having mind blowing sex.”

“And?” He stares at me patiently.

“I don’t know.”

“Have you told him you’re still in love with him?”

“Are you insane?”

Miles gently bumps his shoulder against mine. “I think you should tell him.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like what we have right now. I don’t want to mess it up. It’s...uncomplicated. No expectations or commitments. No strings. No messy feelings.”

Miles hums. “A woman doesn’t claim a man the way you have if she just wants his dick.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I’m uncomfortable that he knows how I feel about Eli.

“Do you think you’ll get the dress finished in time for Friday?” He changes the subject, much to my relief.

“I think so.” I sit at the table and turn my attention to the sewing machine in front of me. “I don’t have any plans for the rest of the day.”

I can already imagine how the dress will look—the fitted bodice and flowing silver and black skirt that flares out.

It takes me a second to become aware that Miles is still hovering beside me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m doing better than yesterday.” He drags out the other seat and drops down into it. “It was a difficult night.”

I search his face. Sadness has carved grooves into the lines of his face. “I can’t believe you’ve blamed yourself for what happened to Kellan all this time.”

“If Evan hadn’t taken me, he wouldn’t have ended up at the chapel.”

“Evan would have got him there, no matter what.”

He sighs. “Ivan said that, too.”

I reach for his hand and curl my fingers around it. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I can’t stop thinking about Evan’s accomplice being with us this week. I was looking at everyone during breakfast, wondering if they were the one.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

Miles squeezes my hand gently before letting it go. “It has to be hard on Eli.”

I redirect my focus to the dress on the table. “He’s not happy.”

“You’re going to make sure he doesn’t do anything foolish, right, Bella?”

“I’ll be keeping an eye on him.” I run my fingers over the material as my thoughts race.

Is he worried we’re going to flush out Evan Ridley’s accomplice?

I know Ivan and Garrett are against the idea. Haven’t they figured out yet that Eli isn’t going to let it go without a fight?

Miles plucks up a silver spool of thread off the table and rolls it around between his hands. “Distract him with all the sex. If it comes to it, you could tie him up.”

“That’s an idea.”

“I’m sure you’d get a kick out of having him completely at your mercy.”

My thoughts return to what Brad said last night.

“Brad mentioned how Evan used to manipulate them. That he wanted Eli to fall in love with Lacy. Do you think they’re still stuck in a loop of playing his game?”

The spool of thread Miles is playing with stills. “You think they’re in contact with him?”

“Jace said he received a letter from Evan, but he didn’t reply. There’s nothing stopping him from reaching out to the others he has in his circle. Did you get one?”

Miles looks at me like I’m crazy. “Hell no. I would burn it without even reading it if that psycho ever tried to contact me. Besides, you’d be the first person I’d tell if that ever happened.”

A little of the tension I’ve been carrying eases. “I’m going to get working on my dress. You don’t have to hang around with me. I have so much to do.”

“I don’t mind. And I don’t have anything else to do.” The spool of thread starts moving restlessly between his hands again. “So, you’re stuck with me for the day.”

He doesn’t meet my eyes. “What’s really going on?”

“Garrett and I are worried about you.”

“And you’re here to what? Keep me safe?”

His gaze finally raises to mine. “Garrett is keeping an eye on Eli.”

“Miles—”

“Last night left me paranoid, okay?” he snaps. “I don’t think any of us should be left alone right now.”

My irritation fades. “If you’re staying, I’m putting you to work.”

Miles shakes his head. “Making clothes is your thing.”

“You can handle a pair of scissors, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can make yourself useful.”

Miles is silent for thirty seconds, and then his mouth curls. “Fine, I’ll help you make your dress.”

He doesn’t feel it’s safe. Has this been triggered from what he relived yesterday, or is it something darker? I never really thought about what reliving the day Kellan died might bring up. Concerns over us all being here with an accomplice to murder lurking in our midst? A trauma response for self-preservation and a sense of danger?

I don’t remind him that I know how to take care of myself now. That I can handle a fight.

Being here with me is important to him. Whatever the reason driving him, I have a feeling that his need to be in here with me is more for himself than my protection.

CHAPTER 86

ELI

“You’re in my way.”

Garrett takes a step back so I can move past him and pull the dust sheet off the sculpture I last looked at ten years ago.

“You have to question why they left everything mostly untouched.”

I glance over my shoulder at his words. “There was a murder on the grounds. They’ll have gone into a lockdown protocol of some sort. Closed the doors, not quite thrown away the key, but close enough, and waited for all the media attention to die down.”

“Why do you think they decided to reopen?”

“Are you kidding me? Churchill Bradley was the number one private school. They had over a ninety-nine percent acceptance rate for seniors applying to Harvard, Stanford, MIT. The money donated by parents to this place, over and above student fees, were in the millions every year. My dad must have handed over more than twenty million during the years I was here. And he wasn’t even the richest parent.”

“You think it’s for the money, then?”

“Of course, it is. The place has been sitting empty for ten years. I bet if we looked into it, the board tried to sell it a few times and got no takers. It’s probably been costing them

money for the last ten years. It might not have been open, but it will still have had overheads. What else can they do but reopen and try and make their investment back?”

“Does it bother you?”

I put down the chisel I was studying and turn to face him. “It’s just a bunch of buildings. It wasn’t the school that killed Kellan. It was the fucked-up behavior of the students inside it that was the problem.” And the part I don’t add is that I include myself in that statement.

Hefting up a file, I turn to the sculpture.

“Why are you here, anyway? I thought you did computer science with Kellan?”

“I did. Ivan and Miles don’t want you and Arabella to be alone, though.”

“And you drew the short straw?”

He laughs. “No. I just asked myself WWKD.”

“WWKD?” I run my fingers over one of the monster’s wings, finding the rough spots I need to smooth.

“What would Kellan do? And the answer is that he’d be here annoying you.”

I get to work on the marble. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I know, but you saw the state of Miles last night. He needs this for his own peace of mind.”

I give a grunt in response. I can’t really argue with him.

Miles had been a mess.

“So, what’s happening with you and Arabella?”

“I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“From the bites all over your neck, I don’t think it’s *that* complicated.”

“You’d be surprised at how complicated she can make the simplest things.”

“Alright, how about this. What do *you* want from her?”

“Whatever she’s willing to give to me.”

“You in love with her again?”

“Never fell out of love with her. She left *me*, not the other way around.” My replies to his questions are given absently. It’s just a way to fill the silence while I focus on the marble in front of me.

“And now?”

“And now she wants to fuck my brains out as much as possible but isn’t quite ready to commit. For ...” I shrug. “Reasons, I guess.”

I step back and admire my work. The sculpture is finished and, while it’s not my best piece—I’ve learned so much about working with marble since I first started it ten years ago—I’m more than happy with how it’s turned out.

“I need to organize someone to pick this up and take it back

to my house.”

“Are you going to let Arabella see it first? She knows it’s her, right?”

“She saw it when Evan tried to get her to destroy it.”

“Has she ever asked you about it?”

I shake my head. “Until the last couple of months, we haven’t seen each other for years.”

“What changed?”

“Elena sent her to check on me at Christmas. And I realized nothing had changed. She’s still the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I just need to convince her it’s what she wants.”

I brush the marble dust off the front of my t-shirt and jeans. “Come on, let’s get out of here. It must be time to eat. I’m fucking starving.”

CHAPTER 87

ARABELLA

Laughter and chattering voices fill the air as we walk into the cafeteria. Ivan, Garrett, and Eli are already at the table.

Eli's gaze holds mine as I walk through the room. Something hot and primal passes between us that has my body almost vibrating with need. We've only been apart for a day, and I'm already craving his mouth and hands all over me.

"For god's sake, Bella. Just tell him how you feel," Miles mutters.

It's enough to break the spell between us, and I glance away from Eli. "No."

"You look at each other like love-sick puppies."

"Stop it."

"I'll tell him then," he continues.

"Don't make me disown you."

"Fine, but don't blame me if one of us locks you both in a room by the end of the week. You need to talk instead of fuck."

I roll my eyes at the threat. "Locking us both in a room alone won't stop us fucking."

We have a few more days before we leave Churchill Bradley. Beyond these walls is the real world. Eli has said he'd

like us to try again, but that doesn't mean it will continue once our time is up here.

All he's doing is making amends for the way he treated me when he was my bully. I enjoy being with him like this. I like having his kisses, the feel of his arms around me.

I move along the line, studying the food options, but nothing catches my interest. It's not until we reach the desserts that something appeals to me.

Miles eyes me when I reach for one of the plates.

"What?" I ask as I add a second one to my tray.

"Chocolate cake for dinner?"

"I don't want anything else."

He laughs. "You're eating the feelings you have for a certain person."

I collect a spoon. "Drop it."

"That's not even a slice. It's half the fucking cake."

I scowl and swat at him with my free hand. "Leave me alone."

Miles steps back out of reach, clutching his tray. "Are you going to eat your body weight in chocolate while we're here?"

"Maybe I will. I need energy."

His smile turns into a laugh. "For the sexathon you're having with Eli?"

I poke my tongue out at him and move along to grab a glass of orange juice, then I walk to the table with Miles close behind me. When we reach it, Eli pulls the chair out beside him for me.

Eli glances at my tray as I place it on the table. “Cake?”

“Not you too.” I drop down onto the seat. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t remember you liking cake that much.”

“It’s the chocolate,” Miles informs him as he sits next to Ivan.

“Can’t a woman just enjoy her food? I worked hard today. I deserve cake.” Picking up my spoon, I stab it into the edge of the sponge and pop a piece into my mouth.

Eli drapes his arm over the back of my chair, leans in and kisses my neck. “Kitten, you can eat whatever the fuck makes you happy.”

Dragging the spoon out from between my lips, I turn my head and kiss him. Eli’s tongue darts into my mouth. It’s a full-on make-out kiss that leaves me hot and needy.

“As much as I’m sure you two are enjoying tongue fucking each other, there are people here trying to eat.”

“I *was* eating.” Eli’s eyes are alight with mischief. “Ari was sharing her cake with me.”

Everyone at the table laughs. Cheeks hot, I duck my head, and focus on my cake. I feel like a shy eighteen-year-old all

over again.

“Arabella Gray, will you be my date for the prom on Friday night?”

My spoon is halfway to my mouth when Eli speaks.

“You want to go together?”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes, of course. I guess I hadn’t thought about the dance.”

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“No. No. I *want* to go with you.”

The way he’s looking at me, with so much heat and intensity, it makes my toes curl. I don’t want to think about what might happen after Friday when the reunion comes to an end.

We’ll be heading in different directions, no matter how the week goes. That thought coats my happiness in melancholy. I’m not ready to say goodbye.

The others chat. Eli and Ivan discuss art, while Miles and Garrett gossip about the people around us. I eat my cake, my earlier enjoyment of it absent.

“Can we move my stuff into your room now?” I push the second plate away.

Eli glances at it and frowns. “You sure you don’t want anything else?”

“I can’t manage another bite.”

“I suppose we won’t see you two until the morning.” Miles smirks. “Try not to break him, Bella.”

Eli stands and pulls me up onto my feet. “She can try.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “Is that a dare?”

“Would you accept it if I said yes?”

“Challenge accepted.”

“Get a room, you two.” Garrett laughs. “Or at least wait until you get to Eli’s. Jesus, it’s like watching a pair of teenagers.”

I flip him off, which makes him laugh harder. I lead Eli through the cafeteria, ignoring the stares of Lacy and her minions.

Maybe Miles is right. Maybe I should just tell Eli how I feel. The thought circles in my head as we climb the steps up to my floor.

Eli tugs on my hand. “What’s got you so preoccupied?”

“Just thinking.” I take out the key to my door.

“About?”

Tell him.

I unlock my door. “Eli, I...”

The words I’m about to confess die in my throat at the sight of the flowers on my bed. Wrapped in black paper, the white lilies are bright against the dark blue blanket.

CHAPTER 88

ELI

“What the fuck are they?”

Arabella doesn't move.

“Ari?” I touch her arm. “Where did the flowers come from? Did you come back up here at some point today?”

Her head turns toward me, and I get the fleeting impression of white features and bright blue eyes before she surges past me and over to the bed. Her fingers pull the paper wrapped around the stems without any care at all, scattering the flowers across the sheets.

“There's no card.” She spins to face me. “Do you remember the night I fell in the cemetery and hurt my head?”

I frown, thinking back. “The night I left you alone ... I was angry because I thought you were hooking up with Miles.” My reply is slow, thoughtful, as I replay the scene in my head.

“When I came back to my room, after I was released from medical, there were flowers ... *these* flowers ... waiting for me. I thought Miles had sent them.”

“But he didn't?”

She shakes her head, her lips pressing together.

“Ari ... who sent the flowers?” Even as the words leave my lips, I know the answer. My insides turn cold, my heartbeat

faltering while I wait for her to reply.

“I think it’s Evan. He’s been sending me flowers every year for the past six years.”

“He’s been doing *what*? Did you report it to the police?”

“There’s no proof it’s him. There’s never any card or a return address, and I am never there when they’re delivered so I don’t know where they come from. There are no identifying marks on the paper.” She gathers up the flowers as she speaks, carries them across the room and dumps them in the trash can.

“You were never *where*? Where did the flowers get sent?” I can’t hide the concern from my voice.

She glances over at me and gives a little shrug. “My apartment. The last bouquet was sent to my workplace.”

“He knows where you live *and* work? Does Miles know about it?”

Her silence tells me everything. Anger stirs. “What the actual fuck were you thinking?”

“That he was safely in jail where he couldn’t touch me.”

“And how the fuck do you think he was able to send the flowers from his prison cell?”

“I didn’t think about it.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Where’s your self-preservation instinct?” I snap. “Jesus fucking Christ.” I drag a hand through my hair and stride into the room. “Pack your

stuff.”

“Eli—”

“No. We’ll talk about this once we’re in my room.” I’m too angry to hold a conversation with her right now.

Evan has known where she’s been living and working all these years, and she’s acting like he didn’t fucking kill two people, like receiving flowers from a jailed psychopath is *normal*.

“I didn’t unpack.” She takes two suitcases out of the closet.

“Great, then let’s go.” I grab the handles on the cases and drag them out of the room.

Arabella follows me at a slower pace, pausing to lock the door, then catches up to me just as I reach the door leading into the stairwell.

“Lilies were Zoey’s favorite flower.”

“I know.” My voice is grim.

“I found fresh flowers at her plaque all the time.”

“Kellan would leave them for her.”

“Have you been to the cemetery?”

“No.”

Her fingers curl around my sleeve, stopping me on the stairs. “Eli, look at me.”

I turn. She’s standing a stair or two above me, which puts

her on eye level.

“Those flowers had to be delivered by someone here, and they have a key to my room. That means they could have a key to yours as well.”

“We already know someone here was involved with Evan back then and is probably still in contact with him now. They’re probably just trying to fuck with our heads.” I don’t even sound like I believe my own words.

“We shouldn’t have come here.”

“You think?” I set off down the stairs again.

“Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?” I push the door open with my foot and keep moving down the hallway toward my room.

“When you said you only came because Ivan said I would be here.”

“Why the fuck else would I come here, Hellcat? If I never saw this place again, it would be too fucking soon.”

CHAPTER 89

ARABELLA

I follow Eli inside his room and close the door behind me. From his tense shoulders and scowl, I know he's angry. As much as I want to tell him how I feel, the moment is gone. He's upset about the flowers, and now isn't the right time to tell him I love him.

I unzip my cases and unpack. It doesn't take long to have everything folded neatly away. He's standing where I left him when I turn to face the room.

Eli says nothing. The intensity of his stare leaves me unsettled.

"What?"

"Why would Evan send you flowers when he was obsessed with me?"

I shrug. "He thought I was Zoey, remember?"

Eli's frown deepens. "You think he's still that delusional? If that's the case, why was he moved to a less secure prison?"

I step up to him and brush my lips against his lightly. He returns the kiss. I chase his mouth when he pulls back. My arms band around his waist, and I relax into him, enjoying the way my body feels against his.

"I'm glad you came," I murmur against his lips. "I'm sorry I never told you about the flowers."

His eyes darken, jaw tensing. “Why didn’t you fucking tell me?”

“And when was I supposed to do that? We haven’t been in each other’s lives for ten years.”

“Elena would have told me if you’d mentioned it to her.”

“I didn’t want to worry her,” I admit. “Miles knew.”

“Is this why you took self-defense classes?”

“It made sense to be able to protect myself if I were ever in a dangerous situation again.”

He cups my jaw with one hand. “No more secrets.”

I nod. “Okay.”

“I mean it, Ari.” His grip tightens.

I hold his gaze. “I promise.”

“Did he send you anything else?”

I shake my head. “No...I don’t think so.”

A memory half forms in the back of my mind—something odd caught in my memory, but with everything going on, I’d forgotten about it.

“What is it?” Eli asks.

“There was one thing,” I reply slowly, recalling the package I received the same day the invitation to come to Churchill Bradley arrived. “Someone sent me a chess board in the post. It was expensive and a strange gift as I don’t play the game.

One of the pieces was missing.”

“Which one?”

“A white knight.”

Pain ripples over Eli’s expression. “Fuck.”

It’s my turn to grip his face. “No secrets works both ways, Eli.”

“Evan said I should have protected my knight the day I found Kellan dead.”

Dread knots my stomach. “Do you think the chessboard could be from Evan?”

“Or his accomplice.”

“It arrived the same day I got the invitation to attend the reunion here.”

Releasing his hold on me, he steps back and rakes a hand through his hair. “They must have known about it.”

“They wouldn’t have known if I had accepted it or not.” I point out. “Or if you had. Not unless they still have connections here at the school.”

“Or they took a chance on us both being here. After everything that happened, the odds were good that we wouldn’t turn up.”

“Ivan talked me and Miles into coming. He said we needed to face our demons.”

“And he told me you were coming, which made my decision

for me.”

“After what Miles told him about our past, I think he planned all this to help him heal.” I wrap my arms around myself and study the man in front of me. “Have you been back to the chapel?”

Eli’s brows rise at my sudden change of conversation. “No.”

“You need to go.”

He takes a step toward me. “Ari—”

“Ivan is right.” I tell him. “We need to face our demons. Mine are in the tomb ... I still have nightmares about that place. Yours are in the chapel. You need to go back there. Confront the monsters in the dark.”

Eli’s eyes darken. “I thought I was the only monster in Churchill Bradley Academy.”

“Not anymore.” My voice is a whisper.

“Okay,” He nods and holds out his hand to me. “Let’s go.”

“Right now?”

“You want me to confront my demons, and it’s already dark outside.”

“Wait.” I cross to one of my cases and dig out the two flashlights I’d stashed before leaving my apartment in L.A.

“Someone came prepared.”

“I was wondering if the tunnel you used to use was still there. Not that I’ve had the chance to look.”

I've been too frightened to go back to the tomb. I am not about to tell him that, not when I'm standing here insisting he needs to face *his* demons. Eventually, I'll have to face mine, but for now, I don't have the courage in my heart to visit that trauma.

I hand him one of the flashlights and then walk to the dresser. My jewelry case is on the top. I ease open the lid and take out the necklace he gave me so long ago. The chain fastens easily around my neck, and I let the platinum padlock settle against my skin.

His attention drops to the padlock when I turn back to face him. "You kept it." His voice is unreadable.

My fingers close around it. "I never took it off until I visited you in the cabin. You were moving around a lot when you were sick, and I was worried you might damage it."

"Why put it back on now?"

I move past him toward the door. "It makes me feel safe."

CHAPTER 90

ELI

She kept the necklace I gave her all that time ago.

That's the only thought going through my head as we make our way through the dorm building and out into the chill mid-March air.

The padlock around *my* neck feels heavy and hot against my skin. I replaced the original chain a few years ago, but I keep it in a small box back in the cabin. It was my mom's final gift to me, literally minutes before we were involved in the accident which killed her.

I was found with the chain clutched in my fist, and I fought with the EMTs when they tried to take it from me. As soon as I was able, I put the padlock around my neck and that's where it stayed. Hearing Arabella tell me that her padlock makes her feel safe is like a punch to the gut.

Everything I did to her, everything I put her through, everything she suffered because she opened her heart to me ... and a gift I gave her makes her feel safe.

Arabella's fingers interlock with mine, breaking off my train of thought and I turn to look at her. Apprehension is clear on her face.

"You don't have to come, if you don't want to." Hell, *I* don't really want to go, but she's right. I need to go to the chapel.

Kellan needs me to go.

“Of course, I’m coming with you.”

We both stop when we reach the bench where so many of our nighttime interactions took place. I stare at it.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Ari?”

She leans against my side, her head resting against my arm.

“When I got that first dare ... the peas.” She laughs. “Fulfilling it was so ... so *exhilarating*. I’d never broken the rules before. I felt alive for the first time. Sneaking across to the cafeteria, hiding from security. My heart was beating so fast, I couldn’t stop giggling.”

“You know I didn’t give you that dare, don’t you?”

“Not at first, but after I found out students only ever got one dare, I realized that someone else had taken them over.” She lifts her head and peers up at me. “*Who* was responsible for that first dare? Does anyone know?”

“It’s the faculty. As far as I could make out, they do it partly to give students a sense of adventure and a small measure of rebellion. But mainly it’s to give them insight into a student’s character. If the student who receives the dare does it, then the faculty knows they’re likely to respond well to a challenge. If they go to a teacher and report the dare, then they’re clearly not someone who will break the rules. It’s a pretty clever way to find out more about people, to be honest.”

“How do *you* know it’s the faculty?”

I shrug. “I overheard Principal Warren and a couple of other teachers talking about the dares when I was a junior.”

“How did you know I got the dare?”

“Because you were the only new student. It seemed likely to be you. And you were so ... *twitchy* the next day.” I chuckle. “There was a flush to your cheeks, and you kept smiling. If I hadn’t been so wrapped up in my anger, I would have noticed how fucking sexy the excitement over doing something so small made you feel.”

“I did not feel sexy.”

“Liar.” I pull her into movement. “You didn’t answer my question, though.”

“I think if you’d left it longer, I wouldn’t have done the first one you sent me.”

“The panties on the door handle?”

She nods. “But I was still on a high from the peas. It seemed daring and naughty, and I liked the feeling. And then the first time at the bench—”

“You didn’t even try to put on a show.” I give a mock sigh of disappointment.

“It was such a crazy feeling, a *powerful* feeling. There I was in the dark, knowing someone was out there *watching* me take my top off.”

“Did it turn you on?”

“It was terrifying and yet ...” She licks her lips, and nods. “It *did* turn me on, and I didn’t understand it. When you brought me out here again and had me stand there, almost naked blindfolded, I thought my heart was going to beat its way out of my chest. I was so scared ... and then you touched me, and there were two of you ... your mouths and fingers touching my body ...” Her voice turns breathless. “I’d never been touched like that before. I couldn’t think straight.”

“But you liked it.”

We’ve reached the chapel and I slow to a stop before we reach the doors.

“Yeah, I liked it.” Her voice is quiet, and we both look at the building in front of us.

Dropping her hand, I take a step forward. “Could you give me a minute?” I don’t know what’s going to happen when I walk inside. I don’t want her to watch my breakdown if I have one.

You’re such a fucking idiot. The girl isn’t going to fall out of love with you just because you shed a tear or two. I’m going to haunt you for the rest of your fucking life if you don’t cry over me.

My lips twitch at the voice in my head. He’s been quiet for the past day or two. Logically, I *know* it’s not Kellan’s voice, it’s me imagining what he would say, but it’s enough to make him feel close.

I reach out and push the door. It swings open easily, and the

thought that someone must have been looking after the building passes through my mind. There's no way it would be in such good condition otherwise.

Taking a deep breath, I step inside and let the door close behind me. My eyes immediately go to the altar at the front of the chapel, and in my head, I see Kellan's body lying on top of it. My footsteps are slow as I walk down the center aisle, my fingers trailing over the pews as I move. The moonlight shines through the stained-glass windows, giving the place an eerie yet colorful glow.

When I reach the altar, I take a slow walk around it. There's nothing to show that anything bad ever happened here.

Did you expect there to be?

"There's not even any bloodstains." I rest my palms on the top of the stone. "The only reason they haven't removed the altar is because Churchill Bradley had it carved out of stone instead of it being wood."

Maybe he was sacrificing people. Aren't most of the sacrificial altars made from stone?

I laugh softly. "Maybe. Is that how you want me to tell the story? That you were a sacrifice to gods unknown?"

Sounds better than the second-prize target of a psychopath.

"Yeah, I guess it does."

CHAPTER 91

ARABELLA

Turning away from the chapel, I glance through the dark trees, their branches swaying eerily in the breeze. Everything is still and silent. There is no sign of life. Yet I can't shake the feeling I'm being watched.

Ghosts.

I shiver at the thought and sweep the beam of the flashlight around. Maybe it's Kellan's spirit. An image of the gray eyed boy with the charming smile flits through my head.

I can still remember the day we met.

Eli dumped me miles from the Academy with my suitcases. I'd been forced to walk the rest of the way in the pouring rain. Draped in exhaustion and soaked to the skin, I was ready to give up when the gates of the school came into sight.

Kellan was waiting for me. He'd been warm and welcoming. Sweeping me up in his playfulness, he made me smile again. After walking me to my dorm room with my bags, he had vanished. The next day I learned that he was Eli's best friend.

My attention returns to the stone structure. This place had been a haven to me before Kellan had been killed. A place to hide when things had become too much. I found Zoey's diary here. She used the chapel as a place to hang out as well.

Are the stained-glass windows still intact?

I'd always found them beautiful. The colors had been breathtaking with sunlight pouring through them. I spent hours sitting, watching the light play across the stone floor. The memory stayed with me and gave birth to my passion for creating windows of my own.

Maybe I'll show Eli the ones I've done one day. If I ask him to come back to L.A. with me, I could show them to him. Would he come? There's still the photoshoot with Forgotten Legacy to arrange. I could invite Eli to be there with me when it happens.

I stare at the closed door, my thoughts shifting back to the present.

Is he okay?

He's been gone a while, and as much as I know he might need space, the chapel holds trauma he shouldn't face alone. Taking a breath, I walk toward the door.

When I enter, Eli is standing in the middle of the chapel, head tipped up to the ceiling, eyes closed.

"I miss you, Kell." His voice is soft and sad. "I wish you were here. Things would have been different."

I stop by the first pew and stay quiet, my heart heavy for the man before me.

"I never should have agreed to you keeping the phone," he continues. "It was dangerous, and we were fucking reckless."

Maybe if we'd been able to figure out what was happening to Ari sooner, this could have been avoided."

The blackmail. The threats. The game none of us knew we were playing until it was too late. There was no way to know we had a psychopath living in our midst. Evan was too clever.

"Yeah, there was no stopping you when you got something in your head."

For a second, I think Eli is talking to me. It takes me a second before I realize he's talking to his dead best friend. My heart aches, and I swallow the lump of emotion in my throat.

"I'm so fucking sorry. You and Zoey didn't deserve this. You both should be here."

My grip on the flashlight tightens as I will myself not to move. Everything within me wants to comfort him and I have to fight the need to go to him. This is his time. He needs to say goodbye to Kellan.

My gaze wanders around the chapel. The stone altar is in the same place. Everything is untouched. I'd always wondered if the place would be torn down, but here it stands.

"I got lost. So fucking lost without you." Eli's voice is the only sound in the place.

I can't stand the pain in his voice any longer. I cross to him and wrap my arms around his waist. He tenses for a beat, then the tension drains out of him.

"I'm sorry ... I couldn't stand by and watch you hurting." I

whisper into the material of his hoodie.

“Maybe a hug is exactly what I need.” His words are just as soft.

“You can have one whenever you want.”

“Are you offering to be my own personal hugging service, Kitten?”

I smile. “I told you I would be whatever you need.”

Now. Tomorrow. Forever.

CHAPTER 92

ELI

I unwrap Arabella's arms from my waist and take a step back. Lifting a hand, I run my knuckles down her cheek. Her skin is cool beneath my touch.

"Let's get back to the dorms. It's too cold to be out here for long."

I take her hand in mine and lead her back to the entrance. When we reach it, I stop and look back.

Time to say goodbye. You don't need me here anymore.

I'll always need you. I manage not to speak aloud. I can almost see his smile.

No, my shift is over. It's Arabella's turn now. Live well, my friend. Let me go.

"Eli?" Ari's soft voice pulls me out of my head, and I turn to look at her.

"I'm okay." And for the first time since Kellan died, I actually believe the words. "Let's get out of here."

I push open the door and step outside, Arabella by my side. We don't talk during the walk back to the school buildings, but the silence isn't awkward. It's comfortable, *peaceful*, and it makes me wonder whether there is hope for a future between us. But that's a conversation for another day. Not now, not tonight.

We stop by a vending machine on the way through the dorm building and grab drinks and snacks. Voices drift out of the common room near the stairs, and I turn toward it, curious who is inside.

Three figures are huddled around a table in one corner—two women and a man. The man, Bret, jumps up when he sees me.

“Eli!”

My eyes drop to the white band around his throat, and his hand rises to touch it.

“I know.” His voice is wry. “Will you come and sit down? I’d really like to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to interrupt you.” I look over his shoulder at the two women.

“Oh, no no. It’s fine. Linda and Tina were just catching up with me. We were talking about ...” His smile fades. “Well, about what happened when we were last here.” He holds out an arm. “Please, come and join us.”

I glance back to where Arabella is hovering in the doorway. I know she’s clashed with both the girls since we got here. She shrugs.

Fuck it.

“Five minutes,” I say and stride across to the table they’re sharing.

I hold out a chair for Arabella, before taking the seat beside her.

“I’m sorry for how we treated you,” Tina says, her eyes on Arabella. “Coming back here made it easy to fall back into old habits. It was wrong.”

“Yes, it was.” There’s no forgiveness in Ari’s voice. “Where’s your leader?”

“Lacy?” Linda shakes her head. “We heard her fighting with Brad. I think they’re both leaving. He asked for a divorce.”

“It’s about time. I’m not even sure the kids are his.” Tina leans back on her chair.

“Ladies, stop gossiping.” Bret retakes his seat. “Brad and Lacy have issues to work out. They need our compassion and understanding right now, not us spreading rumors and gossip.”

I snort. Bret smiles at me.

“I know. I was an awful child, and truthfully, I got worse before I found my true path. I’ve been a priest for five years now. After we left school, I was in a bad place. I lashed out at my parents, at my friends, because I couldn’t live with myself ... with the guilt of the part I played in Kellan’s death and the way we treated you both.”

I shrug. “You didn’t really do anything to *me*.”

“We did, by proxy. Everything Evan made Arabella do was to cause you problems.” He swallows. “But Kellan ... what he did to Kellan ... Everything else he convinced us was just schoolboy pranks, but that ... I’m so very sorry, Eli. No one knew what he was truly capable of.”

“Is that why you joined the church? To absolve yourself of guilt?” Arabella asks.

Bret doesn’t back away from the accusation in her tone. “Maybe it was to begin with. I was searching for answers, for a reason why I followed Evan so much without question and I ended up in a church. I spent hours, *days*, talking with the priest and, eventually, I realized that the church was the only place I felt at peace.”

Tina picks at a napkin on the table. “I turned to drugs.” Her voice is low. “First, I’d smoke a joint or two, just to keep the nightmares at bay. Then when that stopped working, I turned to other things, until I couldn’t function at all unless I was high.” Her tongue sweeps over her lips, and she raises her eyes to look at me and then Arabella. “I can’t ever make up for my part in what we did to you, and it was far too easy to fall back into the habit once I was with Lacy again. I found an AA meeting last night and went to it because I could feel myself being dragged back into that mindset. My sponsor thought coming here would bring closure, and maybe help me move forward. All it’s doing is making me want to reach for the nearest fix.”

“Have you been clean for long?” I ask.

Her smile is tight. “Only a couple of months, but I’m trying. Bret is helping me.”

“What about you?” Arabella’s gaze moves to Linda.

The other woman straightens in her seat. “I went to work at

my dad's company. I was on the outskirts of everything that happened, really, so it didn't affect me as much as everyone else."

"Jace said Evan wrote to him. Did any of you get a letter?" I watch them carefully, not wanting to miss their reaction to my words.

Bret's eyes widen. "No! I haven't received anything. I'm not sure I would have opened it, even if I had."

Linda laughs, the sound brittle. "He probably contacted Jace because Evan viewed him as the weakest and most easy to manipulate."

I look at Tina. "What about you?"

"No, and he better not even try. He's to blame for the path my life took. I want nothing to do with him."

CHAPTER 93

ARABELLA

As much as I want to believe them, I'm suspicious. How can we trust them after what they did? Evan's influence over his friends dictated what happened in this school. They followed his will blindly. If he *has* been in contact with any of them, they could be his ears and eyes now.

I repress a shudder at the thought. That psychopath might be locked up, but he's been ever-present in our lives. The destructive power that holds sway over each of us.

Where would all of us be now if we never met Evan?

"Are you okay?"

The sound of Eli's voice rips me from my thoughts. "I'm tired."

"Then we'll head back to our room."

Bret offers me a smile. "Good night."

"Good night." My attention bounces to Linda and Tina.

Neither woman smiles at me.

"Do you think Bret is sincere?" I ask Eli once we're back in our room.

He shrugs. "Seems to be."

"I'm not sure we can trust any of them. If Evan has been in contact with them, they're not going to admit it."

“Especially if they are still working for him.”

I cross to sit on the edge of the bed. “It’s terrifying to think he can still have that kind of power over someone.”

“Remember what Jace told us. Evan knew exactly what to say.” Eli turns to me. “They were all highly suggestible. He played on the whole us versus them.”

“He *groomed* them.”

“We started at the school when we were eleven. That’s seven years of manipulation and sinking his influence into them. And that’s without thinking about how many years he knew Jace and a couple of the others *before* we joined Churchill Bradley.” His brow knots in thought. “I remember a few students coming and going out of that crowd over the years. He must have been selecting those who were the most susceptible to his suggestions.”

“No wonder everyone is so fucked up. It’s mind-blowing how no one saw him for what he was for so long.”

“He adapted and learned to blend in, like any good predator.” He joins me on the bed. “Evan should be paying for everyone’s therapy sessions.”

“I doubt there’s enough money in the world for that.”

“Thank you for coming with me to the chapel tonight.” He lifts my hand to his lips.

My heart flutters. “I hope it helped.”

“More than you know.”

“Maybe you’ll get some closure.”

“I think maybe we all will, after this week is up.”

He doesn’t mention the tomb or how my demons are still out there ... lurking.

As much as I want to believe I can face them, the fear clutching my heart at going back there is real. I’m not sure I’m going to be able to do it. I want closure and to be strong, but my courage might just fail me before I even set foot back in the cemetery.

CHAPTER 94

ELI

“What are your plans for today?” Garrett asks.

We’re sitting in the cafeteria with him, Miles and Ivan, eating breakfast. Well, everyone else is eating breakfast, I’m drinking coffee and toying with Arabella’s ponytail. I feel lighter than I did yesterday. Maybe it’s all in my head, maybe it was going back to the chapel. I’m not examining it too closely.

“Does the school have anything planned?” Miles replies to Garrett’s question with one of his own.

“No. Today is a free day. Walk around, soak up the memories ... for those who have good ones, anyway. Catch up with friends. And do last minute preparations for tomorrow night’s prom,” Garrett says.

“We’re going to take a walk.” Arabella’s head turns toward me when I speak. “There’s something we need to do.”

“There is?” A small frown crinkles her brow.

“There is.” I tweak her ponytail. “In fact, we should get moving.” I smile across the table. “I’m not sure how long we’ll be, so how about we meet for dinner tonight? We could drive into town and find a restaurant.”

“I’ll book somewhere,” Ivan offers when everyone nods. “Eight good for everyone? I’ll text you all the details.”

Pushing up out of my seat, I hold out my hand. “Come on, Hellcat. We have things to do.”

She’s still frowning when she links her fingers with mine and lets me lead her out of the cafeteria.

“Where are we going?”

“For a walk.” I push open the door, step outside, and set off at a brisk pace toward the path which winds through the trees. I don’t want anyone to stop us or give Arabella time to think; otherwise, she’ll figure out our destination and fight me.

When we reach the bench, I stop. “Sit with me?”

“What are we doing here?” She waits until I’m seated before perching on the edge beside me.

“Do you trust me?”

“Why?” Her frown is back.

I pull out the slither of black material from my pocket and let it unroll. “Red or green, Kitten?”

Her eyes widen. “It’s broad daylight.”

“And that is why I need to know if you trust me.”

The blindfold hangs between us. After a beat, she reaches for it.

“Am I supposed to put it on?”

“You remember how the game worked, don’t you?” I lean closer and rest my mouth close to her ear. “How about one last game before we leave here?”

I take the blindfold from her and place it over her eyes. She doesn't stop me from tying it in place. Standing, I reach for her hands. "Trust me, Ari."

I guide her to her feet and lead her along the path and into the cemetery. The tomb is on the far side, and I move slowly over the grass until we reach the steps.

"Careful, you need to step down here."

"Eli—"

"Trust me."

We step down and I pull open the door.

"Duck. I don't want you to hit your head."

"Eli, wait. I know where we are. I don't want to. I'm not ready for this." Her voice is panicked, and she snatches her hand free and reaches for the blindfold.

I catch her fingers and pull them away. "*Trust me.*"

She resists when I try to pull her forward, shaking her head.

Dropping her hand, I cup her face between my palms. "Do you remember the very first time I brought you here?" I brush my lips over hers. "Can you remember how it felt? Capture that feeling, Ari."

I take her hand again and this time she lets me guide her inside.

"Take three steps forward." I echo the words I said to her all those years ago.

Her tongue sweeps over her lips, and she swallows. “Can ... Can I take the blindfold off?”

“No.” Resting my hands on her shoulders, I turn her so her back is to the Churchill Bradley’s stone coffin, then ease her back until her ass hits it.

“Eli—” Her voice trembles.

Running my fingers down her arm, I circle her wrist, lift her hand, and flatten it against her stomach.

“Why did I bring you here that first time?”

“Because ...” She clears her throat. “Because you thought Miles had—”

“I remember the exact words you used.” I slide our fingers down her stomach to the waistband of her pants. “You told me he licked you between the legs five times, and I was so fucking *angry* that you’d let him get that close to you.” I push our hands into her yoga pants. “What did I do?”

“You used your fingers on me until I was on the edge, and then you left me here.”

“And you were aching, weren’t you, Kitten? Your clit was throbbing because you needed to come, and I left you hanging.” Our entwined fingers slide over her pussy. She’s wet, and as our fingertips brush over her clit, her entire body shudders. “What happened the next time I brought you here?”

I push a finger inside her. Her hand pulls free to grip my arm, and her lips part on a soft moan.

“Answer the question, Kitten. What happened the second time I brought you here?”

“It was the first time you made me come with your mouth.”

“That’s right, but first I made you strip. You stood here, naked, in front of me. Not knowing who you were baring your body to. You were wet, hot, and so fucking beautiful I could barely stop myself from bending you over and fucking you. But I didn’t give you my dick that day, I gave you my tongue.”

I pull my finger free and take a step back. “Strip, Kitten.”

She hesitates.

“What’s wrong, Arabella? Don’t you want my tongue between your legs, licking your clit? Do you remember how it felt when I spread you open, while you were blindfolded, and tongue-fucked you?”

“Eli.” My name is a soft whisper.

I step closer and circle her throat with my hand, tipping her head up with my thumb. “*Sin.*” My fingers flex briefly, before I release her, and harden my voice “Now strip for me.”

She toes out of her shoes, pulls her top over her head, and then shoves down her pants, until she’s left standing in her bra and panties. I reach out and run my finger across the lace cupping her breasts, then move to stand behind her and cup her pussy with my palm.

“Who does this belong to?”

“You.”

“Who am I?”

“Sin.”

“Red or green, Kitten?”

“Green.”

My mouth kisses a path down her throat to her shoulder and I stroke along the edge of her panties with one finger.

“You’re so wet.” I press my dick against her ass, letting her feel how hard I am, and nip the soft skin at the base of her throat. “Step back and climb up.” I move to one side and watch as she scrambles on top of the tomb.

“Open your legs.” I smooth one hand up her leg, from ankle to thigh and push them apart, so I can lean forward and press a kiss to her panties. Hooking my fingers into the material, I drag them off. “We own this place, Kitten. What happened afterward tainted what we did here. It’s time to take that back.”

I kiss along her thigh. “Spread yourself open for me, Kitten. Show me that you’re still the same good girl who let me play with her all those years ago. Offer yourself to me.”

Her hands come to rest on her thighs, and she uses her thumbs to spread her pussy open. The pink flesh she reveals is wet, glistening, and too fucking tempting, so I bend my head and take a long lick. Her hips jerk, a gasp leaving her.

“The sounds you make are like music. Hearing you moan makes me hard.” I flick the tip of my tongue over her clit. “Do you remember how many times I made you come for me?”

How often did you walk around school with your panties stuck to your pussy because you were so wet, thinking about the things I did to you in the dark?”

I close my lips over her clit and suck. A whimper tears from her throat.

“We thought we knew everything back then.” My tongue swirls, licks and flicks at her. “But it’s nothing compared with the things I know now.” I push a finger inside her, two ... a third ... and pump them in and out while I feast on her clit.

She cries out, claws at my hair, writhes beneath my mouth and just as she’s about to fall over the edge, I lift my head.

“Eli!” She almost wails my name.

I give her pussy a gentle slap, and she gasps at the contact of my fingers on her clit.

“*Sin!*” I correct her. “I bought toys, you know. I was going to make you wear a butt plug during class. I picked up a little vibrator that I planned to make you put in your pussy for a day, which I could control from my cell.” I pull my fingers free and stroke backwards to her ass. “I was going to make you come during class over and over.” I press one finger to the tight little hole. “And then I was going to bring you here, bend you over and claim your ass while you sucked Kellan’s dick.”

She moans, and I slowly push my finger into her ass.

“I want to own every hole you have, Ari. I want to fuck you in all the ways you’ve ever fantasized about.” I take a condom

out of my back pocket, tear it open with my teeth, then reach down and free my dick. “I want to fill you up in every way imaginable and make you scream my name while you come.” I roll the condom on, one-handed.

“Eli ... Sin ... oh god!” The words leave her in a rush as I thrust my dick inside her.

“Do you feel me, Kitten?” The finger in her ass pumps in time with my dick slamming into her pussy. “Touch your clit for me.” Her legs wrap around my hips, and she presses a finger against her pussy. “I can feel you around me, so fucking tight. Such a good girl.”

I lean over her so I can nudge her bra away from her breast and nip one hardened nipple. “Play with your pussy. Make her purr like a good little kitten.”

Her fingers dance over her clit, soft whimpers and moans spilling from her lips as I fuck her, driving my dick as deep as I can get it, while my finger fills her ass. When her head starts to thrash from side to side, loosening the blindfold until it falls away, I increase my speed, slamming into her over and over until she’s screaming my name and clawing at my arms.

Her orgasm triggers mine and my thrusts become uncoordinated, jerky, until I slump forwards with a sated groan and press hot, biting kisses to her mouth, her jaw, her throat.

Once my heart has slowed down, I carefully ease my finger out of her ass, and then my dick out of her pussy. I rain a path of kisses over her body, pausing to lick over each nipple, then

down her stomach, around her navel, and a final kiss to her pussy before I straighten.

Arabella doesn't move, legs splayed wide, eyes at half-mast. I can't stop a smile at the sight. She looks stunning, *perfect*, and I know it's a moment in time I'll capture on canvas sometime soon.

CHAPTER 95

ARABELLA

The stone of the coffin is cool against my back. Sunlight filters in through the closed door, and all I can hear is the sound of my ragged breathing. Chest rising and falling, my attention is on the man who's watching me. A million emotions tumble through me. All I can think about is having him inside me again.

Once is never enough. He's my addiction, and I've never been able to get enough of him.

As passion cools, awareness of my surroundings returns.

The tomb is just as I remember it. The place that stars in all my nightmares. At night I can still see the white lilies pale against the gray stone where Evan left me to die.

I scramble off the tomb and drop to my knees in a corner, putting my back to it.

Eli's body covers me from behind, his arms turning me so he can cup the back of my head and press it against his chest.

"Breathe, Ari."

I wrap my arms around his waist. "I can't!"

"You can."

I suck in a shuddering breath, inhaling the scent of his cologne, familiar and safe, and it grounds me.

“I can’t believe we just had sex on the coffin.” My laugh is shaky.

He chuckles. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that. All these years, I cursed myself for not fucking you when we played our games.”

I bury my face into his chest, and tremble in his arms. I’m kneeling, naked in the middle of the crypt, and I’m terrified of letting him go.

“Ari?” Eli’s voice is soft. “Baby?”

“He ... He left me here to die.” My voice is small. “I clawed at the stone, and I couldn’t get out. I ... I couldn’t get out.”

“It’s okay, baby. You’re safe now. This is just a place.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not.”

“It’s *our* place.” He draws me to my feet. “It’s always been ours.”

“Eli, no.” I lock my limbs when he tries to turn me around.

“Don’t be frightened, baby.” He cups my face and drops a kiss on my lips. “You helped me face my demons, and now I’m going to help you face yours.”

My eyes well with tears. “I’m not as brave as you.”

“You’re so much braver than you think.” Eli kisses me again. “Beautiful and badass. You’re my protector, remember?”

My pulse thuds, and I close my eyes.

Breathe.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” His thumb traces my bottom lip. “Turn around for me, Kitten.”

I don’t want to, but I know he’s right. This is my moment, just as he had his.

A swell of emotion lodges in my throat, and the tears spill down my cheeks. “Okay.”

I allow him to move me, tugging me around.

“Open your eyes, Kitten.”

I force my lids to rise. The marble coffin is right in front of us. If I stretch out a hand, I can touch it. Fear is a tight ball inside my chest.

Breathe. Breathe.

He guides me toward it, takes my hand and presses it to the stone surface. His fingers push down on mine until my palm is flat.

“Good girl. There you go.”

Are Churchill Bradley’s bones still in there?

I suck in a deep breath, still crying. “I’ve been terrified of this place for so long. I never thought I would come back.”

“You don’t need to be frightened.” His hand is still on mine as he moves behind me. “Don’t let it have power over you anymore. Remember us. You and me.”

His voice is a soft whisper in my ear.

“You’re doing so good, Kitten. You’re so brave.”

Eli is being *my* shield, when I swore I would be his.

Sniffing, I brush the tears away with my free hand. “You were my whisper in the dark.”

“I’m here, Ari. I’m still your whisper in the dark. Your Sin. Whatever you need, it’s yours.”

“That’s my line.”

Eli kisses my shoulder. “One day you’ll admit that you need me just as much as I need you. We’ll get through the rest of our time here, I swear. We’ll walk out of here stronger. No can fucking touch us, Ari. If we’re together, they’ll never break us.”

More than you know.

I shiver. “I’m cold.”

When he steps back away from me, I feel a sense of loss. He hands me my clothes, and I dress in silence.

Once I’m clothed, he pulls me back into his arms. “Talk to me.”

“I’m not sure a quick fuck will get me over the trauma this place holds.”

“I get it.” Eli strokes my cold cheek with his thumb.

“You do?”

“We’ll just have to keep coming back. If a quick fuck doesn’t do the job, we can do a slow one.”

I roll my eyes, laughing, my fear easing a little. “You’re sex mad.”

The corners of his lips curve up in a smirk. “You love my magic dick.”

“I can’t believe you remember I said that.”

“It was hard to forget.” He tightens his hold on me, searching my eyes. “I mean it, Ari. We’ll do this as often as you need to erase the bad memories here. We’ll rewrite them with better ones.”

My heart is a rapid thud in my chest, and warmth spreads through me.

I don’t point out to him that it’s impossible. The school is reopening, and we won’t be able to creep onto the grounds like two horny teenagers, anytime I need to conquer my nightmares.

CHAPTER 96

ELI

Arabella is quiet the entire walk back to our room, and I'm questioning whether my decision to take her to the tomb was the right one. It *seemed* like the right idea at the time, but maybe I hadn't given enough consideration to how much fear she experienced when Evan kidnapped her.

When we reach our room, I stop her by the door. "I have an idea."

She turns her head to look at me. "Another one?"

"We're meeting Miles and Ivan later for dinner, but how about we go into town now. We can grab some lunch and I need to get some clothes. I only brought jeans and sweats, so I should probably get something to wear for tomorrow night anyway. And ..." I hesitate, nudging my lip ring with my tongue. "I could take you to meet Zoey."

That gets her attention. "Meet Zoey?"

I rub a hand across my jaw. "Well, go to her proper grave, I mean. I haven't visited in a while so I should go and say hi." It sounds stupid now I've said it out loud. "You know what ... forget it. It doesn't matter."

"No." Her hand lands on my arm. "No, I'd like that."

"You don't have to—"

"I spent a lot of time alone. Zoey's diary was the only thing

that kept me from going insane some days. I'd like to go and see her."

"Okay ... good. Grab a coat or something. It's cold." I unlock the door to our room, and she walks in, grabs a hoodie and comes back out again.

She smiles at me when I arch an eyebrow. "What?"

I flick the front of the hoodie as she pulls it on. "That's mine."

Her head pops through the hole. "Do you want it?"

I shake my head. "Whatever you want of mine is yours, Hellcat." *Including my heart.*

The haunted expression in her eyes has faded by the time we finish lunch. She pushes her plate away with a contented sigh, and grins at me across the table.

"I'm not sure I'm going to have space for dinner later," she announces, and I laugh.

"I predict you'll be complaining about starving to death by the time we meet them all at the restaurant. If not, I'll help you work up an appetite." I wink and her cheeks turn pink. "I'm sure my magic dick and I can make you hungry."

"Oh my god, *stop!*" Her voice is a mix of outrage and laughter.

"They were your words, not mine."

“It wasn’t meant as a compliment!”

“How else should I take you calling my dick magic?” I lean back on my seat and smirk at her. “Just admit it. It cast a spell on your pussy, and no other dick has been able to give you the same feeling since.”

She shakes her head, but her lips are upturned, and her eyes are sparkling. “Are you fishing for compliments, Mr. Travers?”

I tilt my head. “Just confirmation, Ms. Gray.”

“Of what?”

I shift on my seat, leaning forward and reach for her hand across the top of the table. “Of you being as addicted to me as I am to you.”

The pink in her cheek deepens to a darker hue, but she doesn’t answer me. Instead, she looks around the diner. “I was sitting over at that table by the window when Sin sent me a text telling me to remove my panties.”

“You’d just kissed Miles.”

“You saw that?”

“Why do you think you got the text?”

CHAPTER 97

ARABELLA

“Miles only kissed me because I saw Tina watching us from across the street. We were pretending to be a couple.” I tighten my grip on the hand he is holding. “Then I saw you, and you looked so angry.”

“I was jealous as fuck.” Eli growls in a rough undertone. “I wanted to punish you for letting another boy touch you.”

“You didn’t even *like* me.”

He brings my hand up to kiss my knuckles. “I might not have recognized it straight away, but you were already mine, Ari.”

My heart stops for a split second and then takes off in a rapid rhythm. “I was so blind. I should have connected the dots. Realized you were Sin.”

“I was waiting for you to figure it out,” His grin is wry. “Every time we met, I had to be careful because I was worried I would slip up and you would guess who I was.”

“I thought it was one of the jocks for a while. Then eventually, I gave up trying to figure it out. Sin was there when I needed him. He stopped the loneliness when I had no one else. I had his dares and his strength. He...*you* gave me hope in the dark.”

“It was so messed up.” He gently squeezes my fingers.

“Looking back, I’m surprised you ever forgave me for what I put you through.”

“You saved me. In my darkest moment, you found me in the chapel and brought me back to life. I’m not sure what would have happened if you hadn’t come.”

“And then I hurt you all over again.”

“We were young, and we both thought we were doing the right thing. Looking back, I realize how naive I was. All I wanted was to be seen.”

“I know.” His voice is low and rough. “I saw you, Ari. I couldn’t look away. Whenever you were around me, my attention always gravitated your way. There was no one else, just you.”

I drag my attention from his face to our joined hands. “I felt you.”

“Felt me?”

“Whenever you were in a room with me. I could sense your eyes on me.” My gaze rises to lock with his. “I was always hyper-aware of where you were.”

I still am.

His eyes hold mine, and the air between us grows thick. All the fear and doubt in my head turn silent, and the noise around us in the restaurant dims. My lips part, the words I want to speak on the tip of my tongue.

Eli leans forward and kisses me. “Let’s get out of here.”

The moment is broken, and my courage fails me. “Okay.”

I clutch the bouquet of pink roses in my arms. Eli said nothing when I had insisted on buying them. Something to leave on Zoey’s grave. I hadn’t been able to bring myself to buy her favorite lilies. The white flowers are too much of a trigger for me. I’m not sure that will ever change.

Eli leads the way through the small cemetery, somberness drenching the silence around us. Dying flowers adorn a few of the graves we pass. Others have weathered wreaths and notes. He guides me to a gravestone that looks more well-kept than most.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been here.” His voice is hushed. “Not since Kell was with me.”

I lace his fingers with mine and squeeze them. “Thank you for bringing me.”

“I know you never met Zoey, but she meant a lot to me and Kellan.”

“After reading her diary, I think I would have liked her.”

Eli smiles faintly. “I think she would have liked you, too.”

His expression is sad, and it makes my heart hurt. He lost so much. So many people that he loved. All because of Evan Ridley.

The words Zoey Rivers are carved across the marble headstone. There are flowers beneath it, and my steps falter at

the sight of them. The pale white petals of the lilies are bright against the starkness of the stone, and they are wrapped in familiar black paper.

Cold rolls through me at the sight of them.

“Fuck.”

“They’ve been here,” I whisper.

“Someone else could have left them. Everyone knows lilies are her favorite.”

“The wrapping paper is the same. There’s no way that’s a coincidence.”

His arm curves around my waist, and he pulls me into the protection of his chest. “It’s just mind games, Ari. Whoever it is, they want to frighten us.”

“You’re right.” I push away from Eli.

“I’m done being scared,” I shout. “Do you hear me? It ends now. I’m not playing your game anymore. Send your flowers. Your chess pieces. You don’t have power over me...over us anymore. No more. We’re done.”

I turn in a circle, my gaze scanning over the graves and trees, back to the parking lot. A man dressed all in black is leaning against a car, looking in our direction. He’s too far to make out his features. Suspicion circles through my head.

“Hold these.” I shove the bouquet of roses into Eli’s arms.

“Ari?”

I take off back along the path at a sprint. I reach the parking lot just as the man drives off in a black sedan. My gaze narrows on the license plate. I grab my phone and take a photograph as it drives away.

“What the actual fuck are you doing?” Eli snaps.

I turn, shoving my cell back in my pocket. “Someone was watching us. I got the plate number.”

He’s still clutching the roses for Zoey. “So, you just took off after them?”

“I thought I could see who it was.”

“In case it was Evan’s minion?”

I nod. “It was worth a try.”

“You just run blindly toward danger?” His voice is clipped, angry.

“They ran away.”

He swears under his breath. “And what if he hadn’t?”

I shrug. “I would have kicked his ass.”

Eli scowls. “Jesus fucking Christ. You are *not* Wonder Woman. You don’t have superpowers, and you are not fucking indestructible. What if he’d had a gun?”

His eyes are flashing with anger, and his face is pale.

I’ve just scared the shit out of the Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy.

CHAPTER 98

ELI

My fucking heart is hammering against my ribs like a bird trying to escape a cage, and I'm struggling to contain the fear and anger her mad dash across the cemetery roused in me.

“Are you fucking *insane*? What if he'd had a gun? He could have fucking killed you.”

“But he didn't.”

“But he *could* have!” I roar the words, startling myself ... *and* the birds in the trees around us, who all launch into the sky. I drop the flowers to the ground, and grab Arabella by the tops of her arms, shaking her. “What the fuck were you thinking? Have you learned *nothing* from all the shit Evan put us through? He wouldn't think twice about fucking killing you, Ari. And then what? I'm supposed to fucking bury *you* too?” My voice breaks, and I release her, spinning away. “Fuck's sake.” I mutter, raking a hand through my hair.

“Eli—” Her hand lands on my arm.

I shake her off. “No.” I stalk off across the cemetery, back to where I've parked my car.

By the time I reach it, my heart rate has reduced, and the anger has subsided. I lean against the side of the car and wait for Arabella to catch up to me. When she does, she stops a couple of feet away and looks at me.

We stare at each other. I don't know what she's thinking, but all I can think about is how it felt losing Zoey and then Kellan. The pain of that loss would be nothing compared with something happening to her. But I don't say a word, don't admit to that, because she's made it clear more than once that once this week is over, she's going back to L.A. and expects me to return to my life, either in the Hamptons or back in my cabin.

"I'm sorry." Her voice is soft.

"Just leave it alone. We should head back. I want to take a shower and change before we meet Miles and the others."

"What about your clothes for the prom?"

"I'll pick them up tomorrow." I unlock the car and open the passenger door. "Get in."

I slam the door after she's climbed in and stride around to the driver's side. The drive back to Churchill Bradley is made in silence. When I pull into the spot beside Kellan's car, she twists on her seat to look at me.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No. I just ..." I keep my gaze focused forward. "I can't bury someone else, Ari."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think. I saw him and ... I was just so angry."

"I know." I unclip my seatbelt and throw open the door. "We have a few hours to waste until we need to go back into town."

I'm going to organize a courier to pick up my sculpture and arrange someone to come and get Kellan's car."

"Where are you going to send it?"

"Back home. He loved that car. I'll restore it. It shouldn't be left here to rot." I climb out. "I'll walk you back to our room."

I walk around to her side of the car and open the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to pack my sculpture." I hold out a hand and help her out. "Can I ask you not to wander around alone? If you don't want to stay in our room, call Miles. Please?"

She looks like she wants to argue, but nods. "Okay ... I can do that."

Mr. McIntyre, my old art teacher, is in the art studio when I walk in. He greets me with a smile.

"I was hoping to see you before you left. Is it true that you're *Sin*?"

My mind immediately goes to Arabella and the things we did in the dark, before realizing he's talking about the art displays I have under the name.

"Yeah. I didn't want to draw attention to who I was."

"I've been to a few of your displays. I always knew you'd go far."

"Thank you. You had a lot to do with me taking that step

and showcasing my work.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m confident you would have been successful without my input.” He pats my shoulder.

“What do you think about the school reopening and this whole reunion thing?”

A strange expression flits across his face, gone before I can give it a name.

“Until that final year, the school had an impeccable reputation for both its academic teachings and the way it molded its students into decent members of society.”

“Please spare me the official bullshit.”

He laughs. “You’re right. What am I thinking? You’re not a kid anymore. Unofficially, I think reopening Churchill Bradley would be a good thing, as long as they employ the right teachers and learn from the mistakes which allowed Evan Ridley to do what he did.”

“What are you doing now? Would you return as a teacher?”

“I work at a school in Baltimore for under-privileged kids. I get a lot more out of that than I ever did teaching rich kids who didn’t give a fuck.” He shoots me a smile. “Present company excluded, of course. You were always eager to learn in my classes.”

I laugh quietly. “So, no then?”

“No. I wouldn’t come back. I think it would be better to hire new staff. Ones that don’t have a history with the school.”

“Speaking of history, would you answer a question for me?”

“If I can.”

“Who was behind the dares? I’m pretty sure I know, but I’d like confirmation.”

“Who do you *think* was behind them?”

“The faculty. I’m sure Principal Warren was involved.”

He nods.

“My theory was that they were done to keep us from being too disruptive. By issuing dares, and then telling us not to do them, it gave us something to misbehave with.”

“That’s right. And it worked well for years. Until someone decided to mimic them.”

“Evan.”

“You did, too, didn’t you?” His voice is knowing.

“With Arabella, yeah.” There’s no point in denying it after this much time. “I was working through some stuff.”

“It was a tough year for many of you. I remember Arabella, especially, seemed to be going through some hardships.”

“Yeah, most of them caused by me.”

“You were kids. Most teenagers are awful. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

CHAPTER 99

ARABELLA

“I have to agree with Eli. Chasing after whoever it was at the cemetery is crazy even for you.”

I glance up from the sewing machine. Miles is frowning at me from where he’s sitting across the table.

“What was I supposed to do? Let him get away?”

“He did get away, Bella.”

“Only because he had a car. I got a photo of his plate number.”

He rolls his eyes. “Maybe I should buy you a bulletproof vest for your next birthday.”

My lips twitch. “Don’t worry. I’m not planning on becoming a superhero any time soon.”

Ivan is standing by the window. He’s been silent since I told them about what happened when we saw Zoey’s grave. The little room where I’m working on the final touches for the dress that I’ll wear at the Prom tomorrow is secure enough for us to talk.

“We don’t even know who’s working with Evan.” Miles points out. “It could be anyone.”

I stroke my fingers over the material in front of me. “What if there are two people? A man. It has to be one of the jocks.”

“Brad and Lacy have already left.”

“So that leaves Jace...I thought I saw Kevin at breakfast.”

Miles nods. “I did too.”

“And Bret.”

Ivan’s eyebrow arches. “The priest?”

I meet his gaze. “How do we know that Evan hasn’t still got his hooks into him? How can we trust what he says? Whoever it is would say anything to make us believe them.”

“Garrett was a jock, and so was Miles.” He murmurs, his steely stare unwavering. “Are you suspicious of them too?”

“I was on the swim team. We weren’t the same as the football jocks.”

“Evan had sway over one of the teachers.” He ignores Miles. “A Mr. Drake if I recall. The police discovered he was being blackmailed. Evan found pornographic photos of some of the female students on Drake’s personal computer.”

I nod slowly. “I remember being warned about him.”

“Evan was also paying off some of the security guards to look the other way.”

“I didn’t know that.” Miles twists in his seat to face his fiancé.

Ivan smiles. “I am very thorough when I want to know something. It’s all there if you know where to look.”

“That would explain why none of the security guards were

ever around when I needed them.”

“People will do anything for money when they don’t have it.” He turns his head, attention moving to the scenery beyond the window. “There’s no way to tell who else he had influence over.”

“It might not even be someone who attended the Academy. What if it’s someone he met in prison who’s since been released? Someone he’s brainwashed into sending you those flowers. Who’s toying with us now. They might be here under false pretenses.” Miles’ expression is troubled. “I don’t care if they are playing games just to fuck with us. I want to get through the prom and go home.”

“There’s nothing stopping you from leaving now,” I remind him.

“Ivan wants to stay.”

The older man straightens and moves toward us. “We aren’t going to leave you, Arabella. I talked you into this and we are staying until the end.”

I smile as he bends to drop a kiss on Miles’ forehead.

“Eli or Garrett would drive me back to the airport.”

Miles reaches for Ivan’s hand and rubs his cheek against it. “Have you told Eli you’re madly in love with him yet?”

A tiny pang of jealousy stabs my heart seeing them so happy together.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because ...”

Because?” Miles repeats. “That’s not a reason.”

“Because it never feels like the right time.”

“But you are going to tell him?”

I wince. “Maybe.”

“At the prom. It would be a *perfect* time.”

“He’s upset at me right now. I’m giving him some space.”

The angry look on Eli’s face from earlier haunts my mind.

I can’t bury someone else, Ari.

My chest tightens with regret and pain. I hadn’t meant to scare him.

“It’s obvious he loves you.” Ivan’s voice is soft. “He wouldn’t have gotten so angry with you if he didn’t care.”

Then why hasn’t he told me?

The thought of him rejecting my love is holding me back. I’m scared of getting hurt. Even after everything he’s said and done this week, I’m wary of opening myself up again.

“Maybe. I don’t know. With everything that’s been happening, all the memories this place rakes up, I haven’t been able to think clearly since I got here.”

“I get that.” Miles sighs. “I keep remembering stuff that happened. Sometimes I swear I turn a corner and hear Kellan

laughing.”

“We don’t have long left.” Ivan slips his hand free from his lover’s grip. “All you need to do is survive another evening and Prom tomorrow night.”

CHAPTER 100

ELI

I return to the room I'm sharing with Arabella with just enough time to shower and change before we have to leave. She's already dressed and ready to go when I walk in.

"I didn't think you were coming." There's a hesitancy to her voice, and I know it's because of how I'd acted earlier.

Crossing the room, I pull her to her feet. "I'm sorry. I just had to work through a few things." I kiss the tip of her nose, not wanting to ruin her makeup. "Give me ten minutes to shower and change, and we'll get going."

I strip out of my clothes as I walk toward the bathroom, take a quick shower, and am back out, wrapped in a towel in record time.

She doesn't speak while I dry and dress, but I can feel her eyes on me. When I turn to face her, buttoning up my shirt, she comes toward me and smooths her hand over my chest. "Apart from the worry over everything with Evan, I've enjoyed this week."

I cover her hand with mine. "Me too."

I want to say more. That I still love her. That I don't want things to end along with the week at Churchill Bradley, but I stay silent. I'm not sure it's what she wants to hear.

"Ready to go?" I turn and grab my jacket, pick up my car

keys and open the door.

Linda is standing in the hallway just outside.

“Oh!” She takes a step back. “I was about to knock.”

“Is there something I can help you with?”

She shakes her head. “I wanted to talk to Arabella, actually. I wondered if she’d like to catch up more with me and Tina. I thought it’d be nice to finally clear the air. We’re not children anymore, we shouldn’t be behaving like teenagers.”

“We’re actually on our way out to meet friends for dinner.” Arabella steps up beside me. “How about at lunch tomorrow?”

Linda sighs. “We’re going to be working on making sure everything is ready for the prom. With Lacy leaving, it’s left us short.” She brightens, a smile stretching her lips. “Oh, you could come and help!”

“I don’t—”

“We’ll call for you at ten, and you can come down to the ballroom with us.” Linda doesn’t give her a chance to refuse. “I’ll see you then.” She turns and walks away.

Arabella looks at me. “What just happened?”

I shrug, laughing. “Looks like you’re hanging out with the cool kids tomorrow.”

Miles, Ivan and Garrett are already at the restaurant when we arrive, and a maître de escorts us to the table. I hold out a seat

for Arabella and then take the one beside her.

“Can we get a bottle of red, please?” I ask, before he walks away. “And water for me.”

“Water?” Arabella repeats.

“I’m driving, but that’s no reason for you not to enjoy yourself.” I touch her lips with one finger. “Just don’t get drunk.”

“What are your plans when you leave here?” Ivan asks me.

“I don’t have anything set in stone right now.”

“I’d like to arrange something for one of my art galleries in L.A. Do you have anything that hasn’t been displayed yet?”

“Something new, you mean? I’m working on a series of paintings at the moment, but they’re not finished yet. Maybe in a couple of months.”

“I’d really like to get something exclusive with you.”

“Ivan, do we have to talk business tonight?” Miles cuts in. “Apart from the prom, this is the last time we’ll be together for a while.” His eyes cut to Arabella. “Unless ...” His eyebrow lifts.

She glares at him.

“Unless what?” My eyes move from her to Miles.

“I wasn’t sure if the two of you have arranged anything, that’s all.”

“We haven’t.” Her voice is sharp.

“So you’re not going to meet up once this week is over?”

“It’s not something we’ve discussed,” I say.

“Eli has his art, and I need to spend time finding a new job. We don’t have time to meet up.”

“We could—”

“And anyway, being here at the school, it’s like going back in time. It’s not real,” she continues over the top of me.

“I think—”

“Oh, good! The wine is here.” She cuts in again, and almost knocks the bottle from the server’s hand in her rush to lift her glass.

CHAPTER 101

ARABELLA

I let the server fill my glass, avoiding the stares of the men around our table.

As much as I love Miles, I'm annoyed he's interfering. Things between me and Eli feel like they've shifted. There's a new tension between us. It makes me hesitant to open up, and even if I do, I'm not doing it in front of an audience.

Eli is silent beside me. When I glance his way, I can't read the expression in his eyes.

"So, you aren't planning on staying in L.A.?" Garrett's voice draws my attention away from the man beside me.

"I'm not sure yet. It depends if I can find a fashion house with an opening."

"Bella quit her job to come to the reunion," Miles shares.

Eli frowns. "You quit your job?"

"My boss was an asshole who stole my designs. Turns out he's Ivan's ex. I didn't find that out until I asked for the time off to come here." I take a sip of my drink, hoping the alcohol will calm my nerves.

Ivan toys with the delicate stem of his glass. "Marcel and I only dated for six months. I had no idea he was Arabella's boss until she mentioned his name after she quit."

“He decided to take out his failed relationship on me.” I continue, anger rising at the memory. “All because Miles is my best friend and is now with Ivan.”

“That’s fucked up.” Garrett says.

“We might have worked out what his problem was sooner, *if* my fiancé shared things.” Miles arches an eyebrow at Ivan. “It could have saved Bella all that frustration and upset at work.”

The older man shrugs. “My exes are in my past. They don’t have any bearing on my future with you. I don’t find any relevance in mentioning them. If I had known that Marcel was causing trouble for Bella, I would have had words with him and made sure it ended.”

“Have you applied for any other positions?” Garrett asks.

Miles answers before I can. “She was looking at a job in Milan.”

Eli stills in the middle of reaching for his glass. “Milan, *Italy?*”

I lick my lips. “It’s one of the cities I’ve always dreamed of working in. I applied for the position there at the end of January, but I haven’t heard anything.”

Right after I’d returned from the cabin after Eli’s rejection. I can still feel the humiliation, pain, and misery from that encounter.

Garrett flips open his menu. “You’ll get to visit the rest of Europe while you’re there.”

I shake off the unpleasant memories. “That would be the plan if I got the job.”

“When were you going to tell me?” Eli asks.

“There’s nothing to tell. I probably don’t even have the job.”

He stares at me for a second, the muscle in his jaw ticking. “Would you have told Elena?”

I frown. “Of course, I’d tell my mom *if* I moved.”

“And I would have learned about it from her?”

“I guess, in theory...it’s not like we were talking when I applied for the position.” I can’t hide the defensiveness from my tone.

We’d been virtual strangers, absent in each other’s lives for ten years. But now he’s back in my life, and I’m scared that if I blink, everything will change all over again.

“Can you believe New Year was only two and half months ago?” Garrett opens his menu. “It feels a lot longer.”

“This has been a long week for all of you,” Ivan says. “But it has given you time to put all the ghosts to rest.”

CHAPTER 102

ELI

I snort at Ivan's words. When four pairs of eyes land on me, I shake my head. "Someone order for me. I'll be back in a minute." I push to my feet and walk away, ignoring Arabella's voice as she calls my name.

I need some air and time to get myself under control. Arabella has been making plans to leave the country. If ever I needed confirmation that what we have been building over this week is meaningless, now I have it. She doesn't think I'm important enough to know this information.

Pushing open the doors, I step out into the chill March air.

Okay, so we haven't talked about what either of us want once this week is up, but I'd been *sure* she might have welcomed me if I suggested visiting her in Los Angeles.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my pants and stride along the sidewalk.

This week is nothing more than closure. I should have realized that sooner. Just another way to get the closure she demanded over Christmas. And, like an idiot, I promised her the week we should have had at school.

How many childhood sweethearts end up together, really? Brad and Lacy don't count. I doubt either of them could have found someone else, not with the way Evan had fucked the

pair of them up ... mentally speaking.

That thought makes me pause mid-stride.

I don't blame Brad or Lacy. I actually feel sad for them, pity them even. They've been as much a victim of Evan's manipulations as me and Arabella have. Just in different ways.

Have they really left town, though? Kellan's voice whispers through my mind.

I thought you'd left. What happened to your shift being over?

Arabella fucked that right up with her talk about travelling to Europe. Guess I'm stuck here for a while longer.

I huff a soft laugh. I *know* it's not Kellan. It's my subconscious forming his responses.

And what do you think that says about your mental state?

I already know I'm fucked up, Kell. You don't need to remind me of that.

I think hiding away in the cabin has made you forget who you are. You're the fucking Monster of Churchill Bradley. Why are you hiding out here, instead of fighting for what you want?

Because it's not what she wants.

Are you sure?

I blow out a breath and turn back toward the restaurant. Pretend-Kellan is right about one thing. I shouldn't be wandering around out here sulking because Arabella has been

making plans for her life without me. Realistically, I should have known. We haven't been in each other's orbit for ten years. Why would she consider me while she decided what she was going to do with her life?

My steps back to the restaurant are slow, but eventually I'm back inside. I take my seat at the table silently.

"I ordered you the steak and portobello stuffed mushrooms," Arabella tells me.

I nod. "Thanks."

"Are you okay?"

"Just needed some air. I'm fine." I lift a hand to attract the attention of a waiter. "Whiskey, double, with ice. Thanks."

"I thought you were driving."

"One drink won't hurt me." I drop a hand beneath the table and squeeze her leg, just above her knee. "I'm okay, Ari."

Her fingers find mine. "I should have told you about Milan."

I shake my head. "It's not my business. It just surprised me, that's all."

The server arrives then with our food, and attention turns to our chosen meals, with sporadic bursts of conversation as we eat.

"What do you think about Bret?" Garrett asks, reaching for the bottle of wine to fill up his glass.

"What about him?" Miles frowns.

“Becoming a priest. He never seemed the religious type at school.”

“People change. And with everything that happened, it’s no real surprise that at least one student turned to religion to help them come to terms with it all.” Ivan takes the wine from Garrett and tops up his own glass.

“I’d agree but *Bret*?” Garrett laughs. “It just seems weird, that’s all.”

“No weirder than Brad and Lacy turning up at my room and suggesting a threesome.” My voice is dry.

Garrett lifts one eyebrow. “Really? You think *that’s* weird?”

I laugh. “Fair point. They were always a little strange.”

“Lacy was always trying to get into someone’s pants. I don’t know why Brad stayed with her.”

“Lack of other options?” Ivan asks, and everyone laughs.

“Do you think Lacy is the girl Miles saw back then?” Garrett avoids mentioning Kellan’s name, but his eyes drop to his plate.

“I don’t know,” Miles says slowly. “I didn’t see their face. Maybe it wasn’t even a girl. I was scared. I could have been wrong.”

“No, I don’t think you’re wrong.” A memory surfaces and I turn to Arabella. “Do you remember that night I came to your room and accused you of setting me up? I threw a stuffed toy at you.”

She frowns, thinking, then nods. “You said I was trying to get everyone to believe you were behind killing the small animals. It was a cat, I think?”

“Covered in red paint,” I say. “I was walking along the path toward the dorm when someone shouted my name. A girl. They were trying to mask their voice. That’s why I thought it was you.”

“And that’s why you don’t think I was wrong,” Miles adds softly.

“That’s right. We know he was manipulating the entire friend group around him. But what if at least one of them knew *exactly* what he was. If their eyes were wide open, the murders and his prison sentence wouldn’t make them stop following him.”

“I don’t think it’s Lacy.” Arabella’s voice is thoughtful.

“Why not?” Miles turns to look at her.

“Lacy likes attention. She isn’t the type to sneak around and hide what she’s doing. For all her spitefulness, she didn’t hide who she is. I don’t think she could keep quiet about being part of something with Evan. She might not admit it on purpose, but she’d definitely let something slip.”

CHAPTER 103

ARABELLA

Eli is silent on the drive back from dinner. Miles and Ivan follow us in their own car, with Garrett tailing them in his SUV. I stare out of the window into the darkness as we travel along the driveway from the security gate toward the parking lot of the school.

My mind is reeling with all the shards of the past we've been stitching together. It's so much deeper and more complex than we've realized. A game of chess in motion and pieces I never realized were part of it until now. Every action has caused an opposite reaction. It feels like Eli and I were always meant to collide volatily at Evan's whim.

Eli switches the car engine off and turns to me. "You're quiet."

"Just trying to figure out who could be working with Evan," I reply.

"Ari—"

"I'm not going to chase after them. It's just that all the talk at dinner, I can't help but wonder who it can be."

"You're not the only one."

"I wish we'd been more aware of things back then. We might have figured it out. Seen who was working with Evan."

"We can't change the past."

“I know.” Reaching for the handle, I open the door and step out into the cold night air.

The others are getting out of their own vehicles, and we wait for them. As a group, we walk across the grass to the path that leads to our dorm building. A few other people are standing around in small clusters, and it feels strange seeing them outside after curfew. I laugh at the thought, reminding myself that we aren't kids anymore.

Eli tucks me into his side when I shiver.

My pulse speeds up. I can't read his expression; his face is in shadows.

I don't know what mood he's in, but I am sure he's going to burn a hole through my heart before the week is over. Eli Travers is the only person in the world who can hurt me with little more than a glance. I'm so uncertain of what the future holds for us. If we even have one at all.

My heart crumples at the thought.

“Goodnight,” Miles calls when we reach our floor and go to our rooms.

Garrett unlocks his door. “One more day left. Prom tomorrow.”

“Then we never have to come back here.” Only I hear Eli's words as he opens the door.

The second we're inside with the door locked, I make my move. I step into his body and kiss him, my tongue pushing

past his lips. His response is immediate, and just as fierce as mine. It's all heat, passion, fire, and turmoil. We devour each other, teeth clashing, tongues dueling, lips sucking.

I break away to catch my breath. There's an ache between my legs that I can't ignore.

Eli's eyes are stormy as he stares at me." What are you doing?"

My palms cover his cheeks and I kiss the corner of his mouth. "I hope that's obvious."

"You want my dick?" He lets me push him toward the bed.

"I want *you*. Let *me* make you feel good tonight."

"You want to be in charge, Hellcat?"

My hands move to the belt on his jeans. "I want you naked."

He helps me strip off his clothes until he's standing nude. With a gentle shove, he sprawls on the mattress. I kick off my heels, and crawl onto the bed after him. There's a sense of power at still being clothed, while the man beneath me isn't. When he reaches for me, I catch his wrists and pin his arms to the bed.

"No. Tonight you're mine to toy with."

I lean down and lick his nipple, trail kisses down his chest, nip the taut skin over one hip and wrap my hand around his cock.

He's hard and ready, and the sight of his arousal makes my

mouth water and my pussy wet.

Eli watches me with glittering eyes, and I keep my gaze locked on his while I open my mouth and take the tip of his cock between my lips. His groan sends a surge of triumph through me. He *likes* what I'm doing to him. I take him deeper, until he fills my mouth, and his fingers clutch at the sheets.

“Fuck. Ari.”

His cock swells in my mouth, and I revel in his tortured moans and sighs. I slide my lips up until only the head is resting against my lips, and I lick all around it, place a kiss on the tip, and move to straddle his hips.

His hands find my waist, holding me steady while I pull up the skirt of my dress. I don't even want to waste the couple of seconds it would take to take my panties off. I drag them to one side, position his cock at my entrance and sink down onto him. The way he fills me, stretches me, forces a moan of pleasure from my lips.

“Ride me.” His hands slide back to cup my ass.

I move slowly, undulating my hips, my gaze locked on his.

There's something different about our coupling. The savage wildness we usually have when we fuck is missing. There's a sharper, sweeter intensity to it. I pour my love into each movement, gyrating on top of him, taking his cock deeper. Telling him with my body how I feel about him, because I don't have the courage to voice it.

Eli's neck arches back against the pillow, the corded tendons in his throat straining against the skin, as he jerks his hips up to meet me with his thrusts. I want to bite them, sink my teeth into him, *taste* him.

I want to stay like this forever. Merged with him. Part of each other. Consumed by an attraction that has never faded.

My orgasm builds, washing over me in waves I feel right down to my toes. I don't stop riding him, and his thrusts drive the pleasure higher and higher, until curses tumble from his lips as he finds his own release. I bend forward, kissing him hungrily as his cock pulses inside me, his cum filling me up. I grind against him, greedily, wanting every last drop.

The need to tell him how I feel tugs at me, but the fear of ruining the moment keeps me silent. Instead, I keep my mouth busy, sucking on his lips, his throat, his shoulders, while he strips me of my dress and underwear.

It's as though words don't exist. We communicate through caresses, sighs, and the pleasure of our bodies. We're wanton creatures, needing each other like we need the air to breathe.

He takes me over and over—beneath me, above me, from behind—until we're both too spent to even attempt another round.

Satisfied and exhausted, I cuddle up against his chest. The night is too close to being over. Our time at Churchill Bradley Academy is coming to a close. I don't want to think about tomorrow.

All I want to do is seek pleasure in Eli and pretend we will stay like this forever, without having to worry about the real world.

CHAPTER 104

ELI

I leave Arabella sleeping in my bed, dress in sweats and a t-shirt, and slip out of the room. It's still early, and we've only been asleep for a couple of hours. But I'm restless. It's our last day at the school today, there's the prom this evening, and then we're all out of here tomorrow.

I'm not sure what the future holds. We need to talk, but I think it's best done *away* from a place that holds so many tainted memories for us both.

I walk through the silent grounds. The sun is on the cusp of the horizon, and there's a slight ground mist which gives the entire area an almost otherworldly feel. I can easily imagine fairies dancing amongst the trees, maybe a dragon curled around one of the turrets of the main building, even werewolves creeping through the grass.

My lips twitch at the imagery. It reminds me of the mural I'd done for the Halloween party all those years ago. I wonder if that's still in the art room. My head swings toward the building where the room is located. Maybe I'll check later. First, I want to go for a run, see if I can clear my head, and make a plan for how I should approach Arabella once we're away from this place.

I push in my earbuds and hit play on my music. 'Darkside' by Grandson fills my ears. I set off, veering through the trees,

taking the path I'd spent so many years jogging along every day during my teen years.

I stop when I reach the bench to take a drink and stretch, and then continue, following a circuit around the edge of the cemetery, avoiding the chapel and out through the trees on the other side of the school. When I return to the main grounds, people are coming out of the dorm buildings, greeting each other in low voices and heading toward the cafeteria for their morning caffeine boost. I consider doing the same, but I'm not in the mood for people.

Instead, I pull out my cell and send Arabella a text.

Me: I've got a few things to do this morning. I'll pick you up at seven to take you to the prom. I hope you slept well.

I shove it back into my pocket and walk over to the parking lot.

"Hey, Eli!" The shout makes me stop and turn.

Jace is jogging toward me. I wait for him to reach me. He stops and pushes a hand through his hair, and his eyes move past me and fasten on Kellan's car.

"I can't believe they just left it here."

"I'm having it picked up today and taken back home."

"Are you going to get it restored or sell it?"

"I'll restore it myself." I turn and walk over to the car, running my hand over the body.

“I really am sorry, Eli. For everything.”

I shrug. “It’s in the past.” And, for once, I believe the words. “But maybe you should apologize to Arabella for breaking into her room and tying her up.”

He has the grace to look ashamed. “I look back at that time and wonder what the fuck we were thinking. How did we think our behavior was okay?”

“We were kids, and we were fucking stupid. You don’t have the monopoly on fucked up decisions back then. We can’t change the past, but we can sure as fuck make sure we don’t repeat our mistakes now.”

I take out my car keys. “I’m heading into town. I was supposed to pick up a suit for the prom yesterday but got distracted by other things.” I hesitate ... *Fuck it*. “Want to come for a ride?”

CHAPTER 105

ARABELLA

I grope across the mattress, my hand seeking out Eli's warm body, but my fingers encounter a cold empty space beside me. I roll over to find him gone. The bathroom door is open, showing the empty room beyond.

Where did he go?

Last night we hadn't been able to get enough of each other. And now he's vanished? No cuddles or kisses. No soft words in each other's arms.

Something cold and hard hits me in the stomach. Maybe this is all just physical to him. My heart cracks.

Was I wrong about how he feels?

Maybe I don't really know what Eli wants.

My cell pings on the bedside table, the sound cutting through my mixed-up thoughts. I reach for it and check my messages.

Eli: I've got a few things to do this morning. I'll pick you up at seven to take you to the prom. I hope you slept well.

I glance at the time. Nine a.m.

What is he doing that's going to take all day? My finger hovers over the screen. I want to ask why he wants to stay

away. Is this the beginning of the end of our time together?

Me: Okay. Have a good day.

I press send and toss my phone down on the mattress on his side of the bed. In the harsh light of day, I feel like we're strangers. I climb out of bed, and throw on a pair of yoga pants, one of Eli's hoodies, and my sneakers. Then I grab my phone and walk out of the room.

I need to work through the messy emotions I've woken up with. And the best way to do that is to go for a run. It's been a long time since I've had the freedom to do that, without the use of a running machine.

The air is chilly as I step outside. I set off across the grass at a slow pace and follow the edge of the tree line. When the path comes into view, I take the familiar route toward the cemetery. Barely anything has changed. I jog through the trees until the bench comes into sight. The path continues in a loop around the cemetery and then back toward the school. I'm heading back, when two men come into view.

Garrett and Bret are dressed in sweats and standing just off the path in deep discussion. I slow my pace as I see them.

Bret spots me first. "Hey, Arabella."

"You two out for a run?" I come to a stop beside them.

Garrett nods. "We used to run this route a lot back in the day."

A memory of Garrett and Kevin hunting me in the dark on

Halloween pops into my mind. It had happened just before Eli had kissed me for the first time.

“Are you all set for the Prom tonight?” Bret asks.

“I think so.”

Garrett frowns and looks behind me. “Where’s Eli?”

“He had something to do.”

Bret smiles. “We’ll run back with you then. Let’s see if you can keep up.”

His words have a thread of excitement spiraling through me. “Is that a challenge?”

“I do believe I see a twinkle in her eyes.” Garrett laughs.

“To make it worthwhile, the loser has to fetch breakfast.” Bret moves across the path. “Ready, set, *go*.”

A surge of adrenaline sends me forward, and my feet fly over the dirt. Bret darts past me, and a grin stretches my lips. I urge my legs to go faster, and I chase after him. The trees rush past us, the three of us all fighting for first place. When we hit the grassy expanse leading toward the school, we come to a halt.

Bret wins, and I come in second with Garrett close on my heels.

A thin layer of sweat chills my skin as it cools, and I turn, laughing, as Garrett skids to a stop.

“Looks like you’re bringing us breakfast.”

He rakes a hand through his hair, breath coming out in sharp pants. “Maybe I just let you guys win.”

Bret’s eyebrows fly up into his hairline. “Are you saying you threw the race?”

“Arabella shouldn’t be made to wait on anyone. She should be treated like a princess.”

“Are you sweet talking me?”

I laugh harder. Laughter which fades when he doesn’t join in.

“If things don’t work out with Eli...well, let’s just say I’m always here for you, Arabella Gray. Now I suggest we get showered and changed before meeting up for breakfast.”

CHAPTER 106

ELI

The silence in the car is awkward, uncomfortable ... at least I assume it is for Jace. It doesn't bother me. I *like* quiet and small talk has never been something I bothered with. I concentrate on the drive, while Jace fiddles with his seatbelt, his jacket, and his cell.

“You didn't have to come along.”

His head jerks up at my words. “To be honest, it's a relief to get away from the school. I didn't think it would make me feel so uncomfortable.”

“It's all the memories. When you're away from the place, you can convince yourself it wasn't as fucked up as we thought it was. But here ... there's no hiding from the truth.”

He nods. “I go over it in my head constantly. How did we get to that point?” His brows dip into a frown. “Looking back, it's obvious what he was doing.”

“That's because you're outside of the moment. At the time, though, you had peer pressure mixed with the typical teenage need to assert your dominance. Evan fed into that. No one realized how fucked up he was, not even the teachers. Don't beat yourself up over it.”

I park the car outside the clothing store and climb out. Jace joins me and we walk inside.

“Didn’t you bring a suit with you?”

I shake my head. “Didn’t really think about it.”

“But you knew there was going to be a prom.”

“Truthfully? No. Not until we got here.”

“So why did you come?”

“Same reason as everyone else, I guess. Closure.”

“Is that what’s happening between you and Arabella?” He pushes open the door to the store and steps inside.

“Maybe. I’m not sure. I told her we could have the end of year we *should* have had if everything hadn’t gone ...” I shrug.

“Crazy?”

“Works as good as any other description.”

“What happened to you guys? When the trial was going on, you were together, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.” I pull a jacket off a rack and hold it against myself.

“Not that one.” Jace takes it away from me, puts it back and flicks through the others. “This one is a better cut.”

He moves to another rack and looks through the pants. He takes a pair off the rail. “You need this type in whatever size you’re in. Why are you buying an off-the-rack suit, anyway?”

“I don’t wear them often enough to justify paying stupid amounts for bespoke ones.” I match the pair of pants he’s

holding to ones that lists my size.

He chuckles. “All our parents would be horrified to hear you say that.”

“Suits aren’t really the ideal clothing for me. I’d just get it covered in paint or clay.”

“What’s Arabella wearing?” He moves through the store, heading toward the shirts.

“I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Jace rolls his eyes. “Of course, it matters. You need to compliment her with your choices. Have you picked out her corsage?”

I blink. “No?”

“Guess it’s a good job I came with you, then.” He stops in front of a row of shirts. “I think you should go with black. It suits your terrifying demeanor.”

“A black corsage?”

“No, a black shirt.” He waves a hand. “One of those. Don’t bother with a tie. She’ll probably end up wanting to strangle you with it. It’s best not to have any weapons close by.”

CHAPTER 107

ARABELLA

“Here comes trouble,” Garrett jokes.

I look up at his words just as Linda stops beside the table. Dressed all in black, the sweater she’s wearing swamps her slender figure.

“Linda,” Bret greets her warmly. “What can we do for you?”

“I’m here for Arabella.” She smiles. “You said you’d help with the decorations for the prom tonight. We’re meeting in the ballroom to get started.”

The thought of spending time with her and the other ex-cheerleaders is unsettling. “I thought the school would have arranged all that.”

“Didn’t you listen during the welcome speech? Warren invited us to take part in organizing it.”

“It’s not like you have anything better to do with Eli not being around,” Garrett says.

I throw an apple slice at him. “Why don’t you and Bret come with us?”

Laughing, he catches it before it can hit him in the chest. “I have some things to do before this evening.”

“That seems to be the excuse of every man staying at the academy.”

“None of us were very creative,” Bret points out. “We just showed up and looked pretty.”

“Come on, Arabella.” Linda twists her hands together. “You’d be a big help in making this evening unforgettable for all of us.”

We aren’t eighteen anymore. What harm can come from helping them out? It’s not like Eli wants to do anything together. The fact he’s not here has made that perfectly clear.

“Let me finish my drink, and I’ll come over to help you.”

“Fantastic. I’ll see you there.”

“Let me give you my number.” Garrett pulls out his phone as she walks away. “You can call me if you need to escape or ... any other reason.”

I smile. He’s been flirting with me since the run. I’m pretty sure it’s because Eli isn’t with me. Maybe he thinks things won’t work out between us, and he’s in with a shot. I find my phone, open my contacts, and add his number. A quick call to his number, and he has mine saved.

“Did I mention how cute you look in that hoodie?”

I tuck my cell away in my pocket. “It’s Eli’s.”

“You look better in it than he does.”

“In his clothes?” I take a sip of my coffee.

“I think you’d look just as good in mine.”

I almost choke on my drink. “Oh my god, Garrett.”

He chuckles. “Too much?”

“You should be careful. Eli will think you’re making moves on his girl if he hears you,” Bret warns.

Garrett cocks his head, studying my face. “Are you his girl, Arabella?”

“I guess that’s still up for debate. If you’ll excuse me, I better help with those decorations.”

Before either of them can comment further, I leave them in the cafeteria and make my way to the ballroom. There’s a hive of activity when I enter. People are hanging up silver and purple balloons, which I guess are the signature colors of the prom.

“Seriously, Linda, you asked *her* to help?”

I glance toward the disgusted voice. Maggie is standing next to Tina at a table. Her face is thinner than I remember. A cigarette is wedged between two of her fingers.

Linda doesn’t seem bothered by her sharp tone. “We were one short, with Lacy leaving.”

Maggie’s gaze swings my way. “I didn’t expect to see you here, Gray.”

“Where did you spring up from? You haven’t been here all week.”

“I arrived early this morning for the prom tonight.” She takes a drag from her cigarette and exhales a cloud of smoke. “I’ve been working, and really had no interest in spending a

week stuck here.”

“You’re not supposed to smoke in here. Didn’t you see the sign on the door?”

She laughs. “Like I fucking care.”

“Oh, look, the bitch patrol is back together.” A familiar male voice says from behind me. “All you’re missing is the wicked witch of the west, but Lacy’s already left.”

“Still Arabella’s little puppy, Miles?” Maggie sneers.

An arm drops over my shoulders. I turn my head to smile up at him, relieved at his appearance.

“Jealous she has a real friend instead of all the fake ones you have?” Miles responds.

“Evan always said you were the weakest link.”

He stills. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“You shouldn’t mention him.” Linda snaps, her eyes cold and hard.

“Evan Ridley is a psycho. He *murdered* people.” The words spill out before I can stop them.

Maggie glares at me. “Maybe they had it coming.”

The arm Mile has over my shoulder drops away. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Cold fingers of suspicion crawl down my spine. “Were you helping him, Maggie?”

“We were *all* helping him, we just didn’t know it.”

“Then Zoey and Kellan’s blood are on your hands, too.”
Miles’ jaw is tight.

“Like you’re so fucking innocent, Mr. High and Mighty!”
Tina stabs a finger toward him. “You took part in the pranks we did on Zoey.”

Shock freezes me in place.

“Is that true?” I demand.

“Didn’t your little puppy tell you?” Maggie’s voice is icy and unfriendly. “He was the one who dumped food coloring on her, just like what happened to you. Miles was as neck deep as we were in the dares. He’s just as much to blame for what happened to Zoey as anyone else here.”

Miles is silent and refuses to meet my eyes.

“Looks like someone’s been keeping secrets.” Linda says.

Maggie waves the end of her cigarette at us. “You’re not looking so good now, are you?”

My jaw clenches, and I grab Miles’ hand. “You can think whatever you like. We don’t need your validation. Come on. We’re not staying to help these bitches.”

Miles doesn’t resist as I march him out of the room.

CHAPTER 108

ELI

“Have you spoken to your family at all?” I follow Jace into the florist.

He shrugs. “Kind of? My mom sends me birthday and Christmas cards. I don’t hear from my dad, though.”

“But surely they understood you were manipulated by Evan as well?”

“I guess. We never had that good a relationship to begin with. It was probably just a good excuse for him to use. To be honest, it was the best thing to happen to me. I moved away and got out from under his control. While I might not have access to the family money, I’m doing okay for myself.” He nods toward a table where there are vases full of white flowers. “What about those?”

A slither of distrust crawls down my spine. “No.” The flowers he’s looking at are lilies. Zoey’s favorites. The same ones that Ari found in her bedroom *and* at Zoey’s grave.

“Why not? A lot of corsages have lilies in them.”

“Not Arabella’s.”

“Okay.” He turns in a small circle and blows out a breath. “Do you know what color dress she’s wearing?”

“No. Why?”

“Well, if you don’t want to go with something white, then it’s usual to match the corsage to the dress, or at the very least complement its color.”

“How do you know all this?” I pull out my cell and scroll through until I find Miles’ number.

Jace laughs. “My sister is a couple of years older than me. I remember all the fuss surrounding her prom.”

Me: What color dress is Ari wearing tonight?

I’m pretty confident she will be with Miles, *and* he will know what she is planning on wearing.

“What about pink roses? Girls always love pink.”

I shake my head. “Pink doesn’t fit with her personality.”

My cell chimes and I tap open the message.

Miles: It’s black, with some silver.
Why?

Me: Apparently, she needs a corsage.

Miles: Good thinking! Is that where you are?

Me: In town, picking up my suit, getting flowers and then meeting the transport for Kellan’s car.

Miles: So, not avoiding Bella?

Me: Don’t be fucking stupid.

I pocket my cell and take a slow look around the florist.

“Those.” I point to a vase full of black roses. “And ...that.” My finger moves to a small display of roses that have been sprayed silver.

“Let me see if I can find someone to serve us.”

“Thanks for letting me tag along with you today.”

I’ve just pulled into the space beside Kellan’s car when Jace speaks.

“You saved me from a prom disaster.”

“Yeah, well if there’s anything else I can do ...”

“This isn’t a twelve-step program. We were kids. It was ten years ago. I’m over it ... well, your part in it, anyway.”

“I’m not.” His quiet admission stops me as I reach for the door. “Don’t get me wrong, moving away and having to start afresh has been good for me. But ...” He shakes his head. “Every time I think back to what we did, what Evan convinced us all to do ... it was fucked up, Eli. If there is *ever* a way I can make amends for my part, you let me know.”

“You know,” I say slowly as an idea comes to me, “there *is* something you can do.”

He sits forward. “Tell me.”

“Name all the people who were in Arabella’s room the night they tied her up.”

CHAPTER 109

ARABELLA

I don't stop walking until we're across the campus and beside a bench, away from any of the clusters of people hanging around outside.

I let go of his hand and turn to face him. "Are you okay?"

He shakes his head. "Not really. I hate this place so fucking much. There's so much I want to forget, but it keeps getting dragged back up."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He takes a deep breath. "Zoey is part of the reason I became friends with you."

"You felt guilty over what happened to her?"

He sinks down onto the edge of the bench, head lowered as he stares at the ground. "I saw how Jace was chasing after you, I thought if I could help you, it would go some way to redemption. That what happened to her wouldn't happen again."

"And you wanted to keep the fact you were gay quiet from everyone, so you wouldn't get bullied."

"Yeah." Miles swallows hard. "I was so fucking wrong. Even pretending to be your boyfriend, I couldn't stop history from repeating itself. I was a coward and should have been a better friend to you."

I perch on the bench beside him. “What happened to Zoey was not your fault. Evan is the only one to blame. He’s the one who killed her.”

“I didn’t want to do any of the pranks on her, but there was so much pressure. When I said no to doing them to you, everyone got angry with me. I would have warned you what they planned, but they stopped telling me anything. I had no clue what they were planning until it happened.” His voice cracks.

I run my hand up his spine, trying to comfort him. “You were a kid. We all were. I didn’t even consider that you might have been part of the group who tormented her. She never mentioned you in her diary.”

“I didn’t want to tell you because I thought you would hate me if you found out. If you knew I was one of them.” His words come out in a sob.

“I could never hate you.” I pull him into my arms, holding him while he cries. “You’re not like them. I know that. You didn’t enjoy hurting someone because you’re a *good* person.”

“Then why did Evan pick me?” His voice is raw.

“I don’t know.”

“He must have seen something bad in me.”

“There isn’t a bad bone in your body. Don’t think like that. You’re nothing like those bitches back there.”

Everything spills out of him, jagged and painful, all the guilt

and fear. I stroke his back and his hair, whispering to him and trying to calm him. I hug him while he weeps.

This fucking place has been bad for so many of us. I wish I could take away his hurt, but maybe Ivan is right and coming here to confront everything we went through will be cathartic enough to let him heal ... to let *everyone* heal.

When his sobs die down to sniffles, I offer him a clean tissue from my pocket.

“Where’s Ivan?”

Miles dries his eyes. “In our room, taking a business call. He’s been acting weird since last night.”

“What do you mean?”

“Distracted, quiet.”

“Maybe he’s just processing everything we talked about last night. It has to be fucked up to someone who wasn’t part of what happened.”

“I guess.”

I wrap my arm around his shoulder again and hug him tightly. “He loves you very much.”

“I know.” His smile seems forced. “I’m lucky to have him.”

“I’m kind of glad he talked us into coming this week. There were so many questions left that needed answers.”

“Have you noticed that none of us are married? Apart from Brad and Lacy.” His voice is quiet. “The rest of us don’t seem

to have settled down. No kids. It makes me wonder if that's because we were tainted by Evan. What he did. What he manipulated us into doing."

"I don't think so. It just made us more wary. It's hard to trust when you're always looking for ulterior motives." My thoughts go to Eli, and how he's been absent all day long. "But look at you. You're happy with Ivan. You're engaged. Maybe it's time to plan the wedding."

That draws a smile out of him. "Maybe."

"What are you wearing to the prom tonight? Maybe you could pretend it's a practice run."

Miles twists one end of the tissue around between his fingers and laughs quietly. "I have a blue Armani suit."

"Want to help me with my makeup later?"

He nods. "I can do that. Are you putting your hair up?"

"Yes."

"I can't wait to see you in that dress."

Nerves flutter in my stomach. "Do you think Eli will like it?"

Miles raises bloodshot and puffy eyes to mine. "He'd have to be crazy not to like it, and if he doesn't, I'm sure Garrett will."

"Garrett is sweet, but he's just a friend."

"Because the only man who exists for you is Eli Travers."

I don't bother to deny it. There would be no point. We both know it's the truth.

CHAPTER 110

ELI

I give a final wave to the guy transporting Kellan's car back to my house in the Hamptons, then turn to look at Jace.

"Sure you want to be involved?"

He nods. "It's only right."

"Let's go, then."

I've already called ahead to make sure Ivan is alone. I don't want to be interrupted by Miles or Arabella while I tell him what I'm planning. He opens the door to the room he shares with Miles at my first knock, and frowns at Jace, who is hovering behind me.

"What's going on?" He steps to one side and allows us both inside.

"Can we sit?" I wait for his nod before crossing over to the small table in the corner of the room and taking a seat.

"Where's Miles and Ari?"

Jace sits opposite me, while Ivan perches on the edge of the bed closest to us. "This all seems very mysterious. Miles has taken Arabella for lunch. They should be gone for at least an hour. I told him I wanted to get on with some work, and I'd text him when I was done. Care to explain why I'm lying to my fiancé?"

"Because there's something I need to do, and I don't want

either of them in my way.”

“Well, that sounds ominous.”

“Other than what we talked about the other night, how much has Miles told you about those final few months here?”

“Not a lot. I know it was a dark time, and your relationship with Arabella was ... difficult. He feels guilty for not being a better protector.”

I snort. “That’s not what Miles is. He’s not a fighter.”

“Miles is gentle, kind and sensitive.” Ivan leaps to his lover’s defense.

“I’m not criticizing him.”

“But it’s clear you think he’s weak.”

“He *was* weak.” Jace says, his voice quiet. “It was probably what kept him from getting dragged in as deep with Evan the way the rest of us were.”

“Miles doesn’t like confrontation.”

“Kellan used to try and antagonize him all the time.” I smile at the memory. “He’d make suggestive comments to Miles, or blow him kisses, just to see his reaction. When he and Ari said they were dating, Kellan took it as a challenge. He needed to prove his theory.”

“Theory?”

I laugh. “Kellan was sure Miles was gay, so he made a point of finding out. That’s why they hooked up. But once they

started dating, it got frustrating for Kell. He wasn't one to hide who he was. He was unapologetic about being bi, or anything else about him. You either accepted him for who he was, or you didn't. He couldn't understand why Miles wasn't the same way."

"Because he was sure his family would hate him."

"And do they?"

"No. It took a while for his father to come to terms with the fact he didn't like girls, but we have a pretty good relationship these days." He leans forward. "But that's not what you're here for, so please ... if you wouldn't mind?"

I nod. "Arabella was bullied a lot. Mostly by me, which I have no excuse for other than I was an angry eighteen-year-old boy who thought his dad was replacing his mom. But also, by Jace and his friends. After she started getting texts, which we finally discovered were coming from Evan ..." I nail Jace with a glare. "And you."

His cheeks darken and he looks down but doesn't deny it.

"Anyway, it took a while for us to find out she wasn't just trying to turn the tables and bully her bully. But when we did ..." I think about the day I found her in the chapel, ice-cold to the touch and emotionally numb. "We knew we had to figure out who it was. To do that, we ... *I* ... talked her into continuing to do as she was told. Kellan was certain whoever it was wanted me to react, to retaliate. But if we knew what she was going to do in advance, then I could plan my response

and take away that angry emotional element.” I stop, shaking my head.

“It was a fucking bad judgement call because Evan knew exactly what my trigger points were and used them to condition me into matching anything negative with Arabella ... Anyway, there was one occasion where he talked Jace and a couple of others into breaking into her room one night.” I lick my lips, and I can’t hide the angry bite to my voice. “They tied her up, cut her off her underwear, *touched* her and took photographs. I don’t even fucking remember what I was retaliating for. But the morning after the assault, which I had no knowledge of, I walked into the classroom, bent her over a desk and spanked her ass ... *hard*. I made her count each blow. Kellan stopped me, but not before the damage was done.”

“Evan wanted everyone to do more than just touch her. Kevin was eager but ...” Jace’s voice shakes as he recounts the night. “Bret and me? We didn’t want any part of it. I touched her ... in ways I shouldn’t have. Bret took photographs. And Evan stood there and laughed.”

“That’s ...” Ivan looks from me to Jace and back again. “That’s appalling. But—” he snaps his mouth closed.

I frown. “But *what?*”

“Nothing.”

“Fuck nothing. You know something. What is it?”

“I’ll tell you once you’re done with your story. While I appreciate knowing more about what happened, why are you

telling me *now*?”

“Because I want you to help me.”

“With what?”

“None of them ever paid for what they did to Ari that night.” My voice is soft. “I’d like to change that.”

“How?”

My lips curl up. “Jace has already said he wants to apologize to Ari for his part in it. I want to ... *convince* Kevin and Bret that they should do the same.”

“Hmm.” Ivan clears his throat. “About that. There’s something you should know, but I need to make a call first. Give me a second?”

“What the actual fuck?” It’s the fourth time I’ve said it.

I’m sitting on the bench near the cemetery, Jace and Ivan on either side of me. I’m pretty sure the positioning is on purpose; in case I decide to get up and punch the man standing in front of me.

“I couldn’t say anything.”

“You couldn’t say anything?” My voice is flat. “That’s your excuse? You couldn’t fucking say anything.”

“Eli, if word got out that I’m a federal agent and *not* a priest, then we would lose what slim chance we have of ending this once and for all.”

“You should have fucking warned us. Arabella is walking around, believing that fucker is behind bars. And you’re here doing what? Playing fucking dress-up and spinning bullshit and lies. You’re messing with fucking lives here. It’s not high school and it’s not a fucking game.”

“I *know* that. It’s why we couldn’t tell you.”

“Bullshit.” I do surge up then and wrap my fingers into the front of Bret’s shirt. “You’re telling me Evan escaped before Christmas and *no one* fucking told us. And that this entire fucking week is an elaborate plan by the feds to draw him out. That we ... that *Arabella* is fucking bait. I’m supposed to be okay with that?”

Hands pull me back.

“Don’t put assaulting an FBI agent onto your list of bad decisions,” Jace mutters.

“*My* list of bad fucking decisions?” I swing around to face him. “Did *you* know?”

He shakes his head. I turn and nail Ivan with a glare. “But *you* fucking did.”

“Bret contacted me shortly after Evan escaped. They know someone is helping him, working with him, but they’ve never been able to figure out who. They thought he’d come for Arabella straight away, and they’ve had people watching her the entire time. *I* even hired people to watch her, but there’s never been a single sighting of him. You were out in the woods, so there was no way to watch over you without you

noticing. It's why Elena sent Arabella to you at Christmas. It was just ... good timing that you fell ill."

"*Elena* knew?"

"She knew that we had some concerns, but not the full details. We couldn't trust that she wouldn't tell you."

"The car at Zoey's grave? Was that you or him?"

"That was one of mine," Ivan says.

"What the fuck!" I step forward again, this time toward Ivan, and he backs away.

"Listen to me, Eli." Bret moves to stand between us. "When we heard the school was talking about reopening, we knew it was the best opportunity we had to catch him. He's been one step ahead of us since he escaped, but there's no way he can resist coming here. It's where it all happened. So, we convinced Ivan to help us get you both here. Our profiler is certain he'll want to relive it."

"You mean he wants to repeat history and fucking kill one of us."

"Not *one* of you, no."

The tone in his voice turns my blood cold. "And what the fuck does *that* mean?"

"You. He wants you."

CHAPTER 111

ARABELLA

The buzz of conversation fills the air around me. The excitement for the Prom tonight is palpable. Maggie, Tina, and Linda are missing from the jocks table. No doubt they are still leaving their mark on the decorations. I'm glad I didn't have to spend time with them. After everything they've said, I can't wait to walk out of here and never to see any of them again.

Miles is quiet beside me. He's been subdued since his confession earlier. But I don't blame him for what happened to Zoey or Kellan. He took no pleasure in the bullying, unlike the others Evan manipulated. I'm not blind to my best friend's nature. He's gentle and kind. If anything, I think that's why he was picked originally. Evan must have seen him as someone malleable to his words.

I point at the piece of chicken he's pushing around his plate with his fork. "Are you going to eat that or play with it?"

Miles scrunches up his nose. "Eat it, I guess."

"You know you could have had something else."

"Was anything left in the way of comfort food? I'm pretty sure you ate all the chocolate cake they had available."

My attention moves guiltily down to the two empty plates in front of me. "I didn't have that much. Anyway, you don't even like chocolate cake that much."

“You think they would have had cheesecake or tiramisu. They used to serve it when we lived here.” His sigh is heavy. “Back when we were young.”

I smack his arm gently. “Hey! Twenty-eight isn’t old.”

“Ouch.” He rubs the spot I tapped. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m going to give feedback that the kids they are going to send here need options other than *cake* when it comes to comfort food. We all need a little piece of home sometimes.”

A flash of red hair catches my eye and I look up. The color is familiar enough to hook my attention. But apart from Garrett, there was only two other redheads in our year.

“Are you okay?”

I drag my gaze back to Miles. “I thought I saw someone I know.”

He laughs. “I think a lot of the faces here are familiar.”

“No, someone else. Someone who shouldn’t be here” My eyes dart toward the door again, but the redheaded woman is gone.

“Who?”

I search around but see no sign of her. “Doesn’t matter. I must have imagined it.”

The vague sense of discomfort lingers. Maybe I’m just imagining things? It’s been a long week. I feel frayed and worn, with one foot in the past and another in the here and now. Ghosts are around every corner, and it’s hard to let go of

old worries and fears. I have to keep reminding myself that I'm not that Arabella anymore, but it's hard when echoes of her remain everywhere I look.

Miles puts down his fork and pushes his plate away. "What do you want to do the rest of the day? We have plenty of time before we have to get ready."

"We could go for a walk, if you like."

He laughs. "Want to burn off the chocolate cake calories before you see Eli tonight?"

I stand and zip up my hoodie, ignoring his sly words. "Do you want to see if Ivan wants to join us?"

Miles shakes his head as he joins me. "He's still busy."

Where is Eli?

I miss his presence. It's our last day here. I thought he might want to spend some time with me. To talk before we run out of time.

I dig out my phone and type a message.

Me: Miles and I are going for a walk. Do you want to join us?

I keep my cell in my hand while we walk out of the cafeteria.

"Where do you want to go?" He turns his head to look across the campus. "The cemetery?"

"No. How about the chapel?"

He shudders at the mention of the place. “I haven’t been back there since ... since Kellan. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to step through that door again.”

My heart squeezes in my chest at his words. “I get it. It’s too much.”

“Let’s just wander and see where we end up.”

The phone in my hand pings.

Eli: I’m busy.

Busy doing what?

I’m half tempted to ask him, but I don’t.

Me: Okay, guess I’ll see you at the prom tonight. I’m looking forward to it.

CHAPTER 112

ELI

My cell buzzes in my pocket. “Fuck. Ivan, can you grab that for me?”

A hand reaches into the pocket of my jacket. “It’s passworded.”

I huff. “Fine. You take over.” I release my grip on the man I have pinned to the wall of the crypt and snatch my cell out of Ivan’s hand.

Ari: Miles and I are going for a walk. Do you want to join us?

I glance over at where Ivan has Kevin Lewis by the throat and is leaning close, whispering into his ear. From the expression on the other man’s face, Miles’ fiancé is not being affectionate.

Me: I’m busy.

I don’t have time to send more than that. I shove my cell back into my pocket and walk back over.

“Are you going to fucking tell me?”

“I don’t *know* anything.”

“Bullshit. You and Jace were closest to Evan.”

“Why aren’t you asking *him* then?”

“I already did.”

Kevin's lip curls up into a sneer. "And you believe him when he says he's changed. What if he's lying?"

"Is he?" Bret steps up beside me. "We've been watching all of you for a while. Jace is the only one who didn't visit Evan in prison. *You* did."

"Once!"

"Not that long ago."

My head snaps around to Bret. "*When?*"

"About six months before he broke out."

"How the fuck did he manage that, anyway?"

"We're not really sure. We *think* he bribed one of the guards, but the security footage doesn't show anything we can use. He knew where all the camera blind spots were, and must have spent months tracking the guards' patterns."

I leave Kevin with Ivan and drag Bret a short distance away. "What the fuck? You couldn't have mentioned this sooner?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not even supposed to be talking to you now."

"Then why are you?"

His voice is wry when he replies. "Because you were coming to beat the shit out of me and Kevin for what we did to Arabella back then. I'd rather we worked together to find the asshole, than have to arrest you for assaulting me."

"Do you think Kevin had something to do with his escape?"

He shakes his head. "No, but I think he knows who did. If

we can get him to tell us who it was, then we stand a chance at finding him before he tries to come for you.”

I suck in a breath and sweep my gaze over the cemetery. “Do you think that’s his plan? To come for me, not Ari?”

“Arabella was a means to an end. Everything he tried to make us do to her back then was purely to get you to react.”

I return my attention to him. “Why are you here, Bret?”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Isn’t this case too personal for you? Aren’t there rules against investigating something you were involved with?”

“Usually, but when the suggestion was made to bring everyone back for the prom, it made sense for me to come as well. I make the perfect undercover agent. I know everyone. It doesn’t look suspicious me being here.”

“Why as a priest?”

He barks a quick laugh. “Truthfully?”

I nod.

“Because I didn’t want any of the girls trying to get in my bed. I’m married with three kids, *happily*. I have no intention of fucking that up.”

A yowl reminds us that Ivan and Kevin are still here.

“Okay, okay!” Kevin is sniveling when we walk back over. “Fine. I’ll tell you.”

“Are you ready?”

I glance over at the girl standing beside Bret. We’re in his dorm room, where I agreed to get changed for the prom, just in case Arabella decided to get ready in the room we were sharing.

“Do I look fucking ready?” I snap.

My knuckles are bruised from punching Kevin one time too many before Bret and Ivan hauled me off him. But he’d said a few things I didn’t like. And it should be noted that neither of the other men moved quickly to stop me knocking a couple of his teeth out or breaking his nose.

But once we got the information we needed, Bret had called in for two of the officers posing as school security to come and take him away.

“Eli, you need to relax. If you pick Arabella up like this, she’s going to know something is wrong.”

“Something *is* wrong.” I button up my shirt and pull on the jacket. “This is fucked up.”

“You’ll be fine. You have to act like you don’t know about Evan. If you can’t do that, then this whole thing will be a waste of time.”

I glare at him. “I’ll be fine.”

“Eli—”

“Don’t fucking *Eli* me. I *said* I’ll be fine.”

“We’ve got people watching the grounds. If we think anything looks suspicious, we’ll pull everyone out.”

I glance at Bret, but don’t reply.

“We don’t think he *will* try anything tonight. There are too many people, but *she* might try to do something to Arabella. Be ready,” the girl said.

Bret hadn’t introduced her, and I hadn’t asked. I don’t give a fuck who she is. She’s not Arabella, therefore she’s not important.

“What time is it?”

“Six fifty-five.” Bret hands me the sleek black box holding the corsage I picked up for Ari. “We’ll have eyes on you at all times.”

My laugh is dry. “Make sure they’re all legal age, then, because they’re going to see things. If there’s any risk of Evan making a move, I’m going to make the most of my last night with Arabella.”

I walk toward the door, then stop and turn back. “What if he doesn’t turn up?”

“Then we go to plan B, so prepare for that.”

I rake a hand through my hair. “Fuck’s sake.”

I take a deep breath, square my shoulders, and throw open the door. Arabella *should* be with Miles and Ivan, whose room is a few doors down from Bret, and it takes me barely any time at all to reach it.

I fiddle with the front of my shirt, and then rap on the door. It swings open almost immediately. Arabella is framed in the doorway and at the sight of her ... I lose the ability to speak.

CHAPTER 113

ARABELLA

Eli is standing in the hallway, staring at me without blinking. He looks handsome in his black suit. His hair is brushed back, and his jaw is cleanly shaved. For a second, all I can do is stare at his sharp cheekbones and those turbulent eyes and remember the boy who walked into my life all those years ago and turned my world upside down.

I bite my lip, feeling ridiculously shy. Like I'm eighteen all over again. "Hi."

He blinks and swallows. "Hey."

"You look handsome."

"You're beautiful."

Heat rushes into my cheeks, and I glance down at my dress. The same one I've been working on all week. "Thanks. I'm glad you like it."

"She designed it herself," Miles calls from within the room. "She's seriously talented."

Eli's gaze lingers on my face and my hair, which is in a coiled braid on top of my head. His attention then sweeps down over my ball gown from the décolleté neckline trimmed with silver to the flowing black skirts, then back up to my face.

"You made this?"

I nod. “You should see what else I can whip up on a sewing machine. I can make a mean set of cushion covers.”

My joke breaks a little of the tension between us, and he laughs. “I got you this.”

Mouth dry, I let him slip the corsage he’s holding onto my wrist. One sprayed-silver rose is nestled between two black roses.

“It’s perfect.”

Eli links his fingers with mine. “Just like you. Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Gathering up a handful of skirts, I step out of the room. “What happened to your hands.”

“It’s nothing.”

I know that means he doesn’t want to talk about the bruises I can see on his knuckles. I swallow down the questions I have. I don’t want to ruin the evening before it’s even started. Maybe later, after the night is done, he’ll be open to talking about it.

“We’ll follow you down,” Miles tells us, fiddling with his tie. “Don’t have too much fun until we get there.”

I smile. “Okay.”

I can’t believe we are here, in this moment. My heart is beating so fast behind my ribs, I wonder if he can hear it. After all his avoidance today, I’m relieved he’s turned up.

Eli leads me along the corridor. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m a little anxious. I can’t stop thinking about the last two dances I had here and how those ended.”

“That’s in the past. Tonight will be different.”

There’s a strange note in his voice, one that doesn’t ease my worries. “Is everything okay?”

We halt by the doors leading out of the dorm building, and he squeezes my hand gently. “Everything is fine.”

I search his face. “Are you sure? It’s our last evening here. If there’s something wrong ... if you don’t want to attend the prom with me, you don’t have to.”

“Of course, I want to go with you.”

I exhale slowly. “This place has me all mixed up. It’s been hard being back, I haven’t been myself ... Eli, I—”

A hand under my chin tilts my head up. His lips land on mine, silencing my words. As his tongue invades my mouth to duel with mine, I melt against him. I taste the heat and fire between us. The addictive flavor of Eli Travers washing over my senses and stealing the breath from my lungs.

“I promise I’ll make sure you’ll never forget tonight.” His words are against my lips.

All I can do is blink up at him. “You’re going to make it memorable?”

“You’ll be thinking of tonight for years to come.”

Why does he know exactly the right things to say to turn me on?

My lips move against his. “I hope you can live up to that promise, Mr. Travers.”

His mouth takes mine in another passionate kiss. We’re not even at the prom yet, and I’m already a wanton puddle of mush.

CHAPTER 114

ELI

Am I finding reasons to avoid taking those final steps into the hall where the prom is being held? One hundred percent yes. The second we walk inside, it's going to potentially trigger a sequence of events we have no control over, and it could well result in me never seeing Arabella again.

If that's going to be the case, I need to store up as many memories as I can and, if the worst does happen, it'll leave *her* with good things to think about later ... after the dust has settled and she's stopped hating me for hurting her ... again.

I hope whatever happens, it doesn't come to that.

"Eli?" Arabella's quiet voice snaps me out of my thoughts, and I realize I've stopped on the path and I'm staring across the grass toward the trees.

"Sorry. I spaced out." I curve my arm around her waist and tug her into my side. "I can't believe how everything looks exactly the same as it did ten years ago." I summon up a smile and drop one more kiss to her lips. "Did I tell you how gorgeous you look?"

Her smile lights up her face. "You might have mentioned it. But I don't mind hearing it again."

I drop my arm from her waist, link my fingers with hers, and turn to face her. "Ms. Gray, you look positively ravishing." I

keep my voice light and push away the dark thoughts. Lifting her fingers to my lips, I kiss each one. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world, and I’m humbled that you chose to spend tonight with me.” My smile turns into a smirk. “Not that you have many other options. I’m the best of a bad bunch.”

Her free hand cups the back of my head to slide into my hair. “I think you underestimate your appeal, Mr. Travers.” She pulls me down for another kiss.

I smile against her lips. “We’re never going to make it to the prom.”

“For goodness sake, put the girl down!” Ivan’s voice booms through the darkness.

Arabella jumps, then laughs. Her hand drops from my hair, and she turns to greet Miles and Ivan.

“You two look very handsome.” She kisses both men on their cheeks.

“And you look radiant.” Ivan smiles, but his gaze shifts to me over her shoulder. “Are you ready?”

“For a night of dancing and debauchery?” I arch an eyebrow. The last thing I need is for Miles or Arabella to think something is wrong.

“Debauchery?” Arabella spins back to face me.

“It’s prom, Hellcat. What do you think happens at these things?” I hold out my hand and wait for her to take it. “As

your official date, it's expected that you're going to give it up to me. Usually, it's in the back of a car, or a cheap motel room, but I think I can do better than that."

"Oh, I see. You think I'm a sure thing?"

"Aren't you?" I duck the punch she aims at my shoulder. "It's in the rules, Kitten. Prom date gets the goodies."

"That's disgusting." She glares at me, but she's laughing when she says it.

"Stop flirting with each other and get moving." Miles rolls his eyes, smiling at Arabella. "I'm going to need a strong drink if I have to watch the two of you like this all evening."

I'm going to need a strong drink to get through the evening, anyway. But I don't say that out loud. Ivan's eyes catch mine. I give a small shake of my head. We're not going to ruin the night for Arabella or Miles by telling them what we've discovered. We've both promised to make tonight as special as we can for as long as we can.

If Evan does make his move, we'll be ready. If he doesn't ... well, like Bret said, there's always plan fucking B.

"My feet are killing me." Arabella collapses against my chest, looping her arms around my neck as we move around the dancefloor.

"Poor little Princess. Maybe this is how Cinderella lost her slipper. Took it off to ease the blisters on her feet."

I adjust my grip on her waist and swing her up into my arms. She shrieks and clings tighter to my neck.

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t have you damaging those cute little toes, can I?” I weave between the dancing couples and deposit her on a chair at the table we’re sharing with Miles, Ivan, and Garrett.

“Would my lady like a drink?”

“Yes, she would.” She waggles her fingers at me. “Water, though, please. It’s too hot in here.”

“Whatever my Princess desires.” I give her a half-bow and head for the bar and buffet that’s been set up in one corner of the room.

I’m collecting two bottles of water when Bret stops beside me.

“You’re doing great.” He piles finger food onto his plate.

“Thanks, Dad.”

He snorts. “That did sound a little patronizing, didn’t it? I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” I glance around, checking to see if anyone is nearby. “Is there any news?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing so far. Just stay alert.”

“There’s something I need to do. We’re going to disappear for a little while. Make sure no one follows us.”

“Eli—”

“I’m not going to spend the night worrying about what might happen. I had a plan for this evening, and I’m going through with it. If Ivan hadn’t outed your real purpose here, I wouldn’t have any idea about it ... and that’s how I’m going to behave. So, make sure no one disturbs us.”

“Where will you be?”

I smile. “You’re the agent. You figure it out.” I turn my back on him and go back to the table.

Placing both bottles of water on the table, I drag another chair around until it’s in front of Arabella and sit down. I pat my leg.

“Foot.”

“Are you having a stroke? That’s your leg.” Arabella twists off the cap from her water bottle.

I roll my eyes. “Put your foot up here, Hellcat.” I reach down and wrap my fingers around her ankles, lift her legs and place her feet on my thigh, then ease her shoes off.

“What are you doing?”

“Foot massage.” I run my fingers over the sole of one foot. “You remember the last time I gave you one of those, don’t you?”

Her cheeks fire up, which gives me the answer to that question. I’d been naked on the floor of my cabin, doing whatever it took to make her forgive me for the things I’d done to her. I rub her foot, watching the play of emotions cross

her face. When she gives a soft sigh and closes her eyes, I smile.

“Feel good?”

“So good,” she breathes.

I set her feet down and take out my cell. Keeping one eye on Arabella to make sure she doesn't see what I'm doing, I type out a message.

Me: Go to the restroom, take off your panties, then meet me by your locker. Red or green?

CHAPTER 115

ARABELLA

I take another sip of water from the bottle. My cheeks are warm, and the heat in the ballroom is a little overwhelming. The dance floor is busy with dancers. Eli has kept me on my feet, and my body pressed to the length of his for what feels like hours. He's been flirty and courteous. Teasing and funny. The perfect partner.

Eli has never been my Prince Charming. When we were both here at the Academy as kids, he was the villain of my story. The monster who had owned these hallways. Our time together is slipping away faster, like water between my fingers.

When I was small, I believed in fairy tales. Will this one end at the stroke of midnight? What will we be when this all finally comes to an end? A memory to keep me warm at night when I'm alone, or something else?

Just focus on tonight. Don't think about tomorrow.

My bag buzzes on my lap. I frown down at it, discard my bottle, and open it to check my phone.

Eli: Go to the restroom, take off your panties, then meet me by your locker. Red or green?

Gaze jerking up, I meet his stare. There's a smile dancing

across his lips. His eyes are filled with fire and amusement.

He wants to play one more time.

My heart sets a wild beat in my chest. *Red or green?* There's only ever been one choice for me to make, and he knows it.

I reply to the text.

Me: It's bold of you to think I'm wearing panties tonight at all.

Eli's attention drops to his phone. His tongue flicks out to play with his lip ring, and he types back.

Eli: Are you?

Me: A black thong.

I smile.

Eli: Red or green?

Me: Green.

Is he as eager as I am? Is the adrenaline already coursing through his veins?

"I need to use the restroom ... If you'll excuse me." I slip my shoes back on, put my cell back into my bag and stand.

Miles rises. "Ivan, dance with me."

I don't hear his fiancé's reply. Excitement burns through me, and I am already craving what Eli might do next. If I'm going to leave here with any good memories, I want them to be of him—my Nasty Little Monster.

A couple of women pass me as I enter the restroom. I know they must have been seniors, but we didn't share any classes and I don't know them. The first stall is free, and I go inside to lock the door. Eyes closed, I take a deep breath. Butterflies swarm in my belly as I pull up my skirts and tug down my thong. It slips easily down my legs. I step out of them and crouch to pick them up. Bag open, I stuff them inside out of sight.

Tonight, I'll let Eli know I still love him. When the prom comes to an end, I'll confess everything and pray he feels the same. That this week hasn't been one last fling for me.

And what if it has been for him? What if this has just been to work you out of his system so he can walk away. He's not mentioned the future. Everything has been purely physical. He's been making amends for how he treated you back when he bullied you.

The insidious thought clouds my mind with doubt. Maggie is beside the sink when I step out.

The second our eyes collide, her lips curve up. "I saw you dancing with Eli. Don't think that's going to last."

I move past her to wash my hands. "Why don't you just fuck off and leave me alone?"

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"That's none of your damn business."

"Poor little Arabella Gray." Maggie swivels to check her

appearance in the mirror. “It won’t work out. I know his type. They get bored easily.”

“You don’t know him.” Drying my hands, I throw the balled-up paper towel in the trash can by the door.

“I know him better than you think. We were together a year before you showed up at school.”

If she thinks I believe that she’s insane.

“You mean he fucked you once.”

A smile tips her lips up. “More than once.”

“Wow, twice. Congratulations for holding his attention a little longer than every other girl who wanted a piece of him.”

“He wanted me—”

“If he wanted you, then you would have been his girlfriend instead of a quick fuck when he was bored. You aren’t special, Maggie. You can’t intimidate me anymore. Lacy learned that the hard way.”

“I knew you had something to do with her leaving.” A new voice joins the conversation, and my attention shifts to the woman emerging from the end stall.

Tina moves to the sink to wash her hands. “Don’t forget you were one of Eli’s dirty little secrets too, Arabella.”

I don’t reply.

“Didn’t he only hook up with you where no one else could see?” she continues. “Maybe he was too embarrassed to be

seen with you. After all, he was always way out of your league. If you were really meant to be together, then you'd be a couple now, but you're not, are you? You're just fuck buddies as far as anyone can tell."

Anger thrums through me, but I hold it in check. "Why don't you both get a fucking life? I'm done with school, and I don't care what either of you think. What happens between me and Eli has nothing to do with you or anyone else here."

Linda is entering the restroom as I exit. She opens her mouth to say something, but I don't stop. Tina's words circle in my head, coming back each time I push them away, and by the time I reach the lockers, my excitement for what Eli has planned has dimmed, and my worries hover like vultures over a rotting corpse.

Eli is waiting, leaning against the lockers, hands shoved deep into his pockets. His intense eyes zero in on me. Without a word, I walk up to him and wrap my arms around his waist.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Kitten?" He uses a finger under my chin to lift my head so he can trail soft kisses along my neck and jaw.

"Play with me, Eli. Show me your darkness. Don't hold back tonight. Give me everything. All of it."

I turn my head and capture his mouth in a deep kiss. He tastes of mint and passion. His arms are secure and safe. They

feel like home, and I want to wrap myself up in him forever. In them, I can forget what Maggie and Tina have said.

Tonight belongs to Eli and me. I won't let them destroy that.

Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 116

ELI

The happiness that surrounded her when she'd left to go to the restroom has gone. There's an edge, a desperation to her kiss, as though she knows what might happen tonight. I pull back slightly, searching her face for clues.

"What happened?"

She shakes her head. "Just the girls acting like they're schoolkids again."

"Who? What did they say?"

"It isn't important."

"You're upset. That makes it important."

Her sigh is irritable. I run a finger over her lips.

"Tell me, so we can move on."

"Maggie said you were together in school."

I frown. "I didn't have a girlfriend at school until you."

"She said you were together before I arrived."

"We definitely weren't."

"But you fucked her."

I examine her face, the tone of her voice. She's not happy with what she's heard.

"It wasn't cheating, Ari. I didn't even know you existed

when I fucked her.”

“I *know* that.”

“Then why are you so angry about it? Who gives a fuck what they’re claiming? That was then. This is now.” I hook a finger into the strap holding her dress up. “And right now, I want to get you out of this dress, so I can fuck you.” I tug the strap down her arm. “So, red or green, Kitten?”

“Here?”

“Right here. Against your locker. I want your legs spread wide and my dick in your pussy.” I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her against me. “Did you take your panties off like I told you?”

She nods.

“Where are they?”

“In my bag.”

“Give them to me.”

“Why?” Her brow pleats.

“Why, Ms. Gray, don’t you trust me?” I hold out my hand. “Panties. Now.”

Her eyes widen, and then she scrambles to open her bag and takes out the silky scrap of material. She places them into my palm.

“Good girl.”

Her cheeks turn pink.

“Turn around.”

“Eli—”

“You know the rules, Kitten. Red to stop.” I put her panties into my pocket, then rest my hands on her shoulders and turn her to face the lockers. “Do you want to stop?”

“No. Green.”

I press a kiss to the base of her throat. “There’s my good girl.” My fingers find the zipper at the back of her dress and pull it down.

“You’re not seriously going to—”

“Stop talking.” I drag the bodice of her dress down, revealing her breasts. Her nipples harden in the cool air. “So pretty.”

“Eli—”

“Open your mouth.” I reach around and wrap my fingers over her jaw, pluck the panties out of my pocket with the other and stuff them between her lips. She gives a strangled gasp.

“If you can’t follow instructions, I’ll just have to find other ways to get you to do what I want.” I pat her cheek. “Put your palms on the lockers in front of you, then turn your head toward me. Let me see how pretty you look with your panties in your mouth and your tits on display.”

I step to the side and take out my cell, snapping a photograph when her head turns toward me. “The only thing that would make that picture better is if your pussy was in it.”

I return to my position behind her and lick my way down her spine.

“Are you wet, Kitten?” I gather the material of her skirt up in my hand and draw it up her leg. “Am I going to find that pretty pussy all soaked and desperate?”

Her moan is muffled, and her legs shift restlessly, her thighs pressing together. I give her ass a light slap when I uncover it. “Don’t hide your need from me. Open your legs.” I tuck the skirts of her dress into where it’s pooled around her waist.

“Wider.” I use one foot to push her legs further apart. “You didn’t answer my question. Are you wet? Is your clit aching? How quickly will you come when I touch you?”

Her response is a garbled mess, unintelligible through the panties in her mouth.

“I guess I better find out for myself, huh?” My palm smooths over her ass, dips down between her thighs and over her pussy.

She shudders against me, and I laugh softly.

“Like that, is it?” I push one finger inside her and rub my thumb over her clit. “This is mine, Kitten. It’s *always* been mine.” Another finger joins the first. “Your pussy is mine. Your clit is mine.” I reach around and pinch one nipple. “These are mine. Mine to touch, mine to toy with, mine to mark.”

Her pussy contracts around my fingers, her eyelashes

lowering. I still my movements.

“Oh no, Kitten. You don’t get to come yet.” I lower myself to my knees. “Do you have any idea how good you look with my fingers filling your pussy.” I lick over her ass, then bite into one cheek. “I spent many nights fisting my dick and imagining how good you would feel when I finally fucked you.” I kiss the mark my teeth have left. “It didn’t even come close to the reality of your pussy swallowing my dick.” I push a third finger inside her. “And once I had a taste, I became an addict. I needed to have my dick inside you, or your pussy in my mouth more than I needed anything else. You became my obsession ... my muse.” My thumb sweeps over her clit again, and her entire body jerks.

“Play with your nipples, Kitten. Tug them and twist them.” I stand up, pulling my fingers free, and smear her arousal over her lips while she plays with her nipples. “Lick your lips. Suck on my fingers. Taste yourself.” I take the panties out of her mouth.

With my free hand, I unzip my pants, while she laps and licks at my fingers. “You have a choice. I can use a condom, or I can fuck you bare.”

“Bare.” She gasps the word, her breasts bouncing while she plucks and plays with them.

I wrap my arm around her waist to hold her steady, grip my dick and push inside her. My mouth is close to her ear as I thrust as deep as I get.

“I’m going to fill you up with my cum, and you’re going to spend the next hour of the ball with it inside you ... just like we did back in math.”

CHAPTER 117

ARABELLA

Eli's words send warmth through me. I have one hand braced against the locker, while he thrusts his cock in and out of my body. A moan of pleasure escapes my lips. He pulls back to push back into me again roughly. It's pure heaven. My free hand cups my breast, and I tease the nipple between my fingers.

"Anyone could walk down here and see us." His voice is no more than a growl.

My pussy floods with more wetness around his cock at the thought.

"You like that idea, don't you, Kitten? Others watching us while I fuck you." He jerks his hips, pushing deeper inside me. "You get off on it."

I gasp. "Yes! Oh my god, Eli."

There's something forbidden ... taboo ... about the scenario. I love the idea of knowing they could watch but can't touch.

Why hide things he already knows? He learned all my deepest darkest secrets when he'd been my masked lover. He pushed my boundaries. Explored my fantasies.

Our games had been twisted up with lies and lust, until things changed.

But desperation fuels tonight. A desire and need so strong, I

feel it bone deep.

“Do you feel how perfectly we fit together?” He rocks into me with fluid, powerful movements.

Every thrust of his cock makes me hungry for the release I know he can give me. The events of earlier fade. It’s just him and me.

My monster in the dark.

My lover who does dirty things to me.

I’m mindless with desire, with hunger, with *love*, as I join his rhythm.

I’m his toy. His puppet. His to command.

“You feel so good, Kitten.” Eli grinds against my ass. “Look at me.”

I’m close to combusting when I lift my eyes and look at him over my shoulder.

“You have that hungry look in your eyes.” His husky voice sends a fresh wave of needy arousal through me. “You want to come, don’t you?”

“I need—” I struggle to get the rest of the words out. The intoxicating feeling of him inside me steals my ability to think.

“Don’t worry, Kitten. I’ll give you what you need. I always will.” He grips my hips, and thrusts into me harder.

My hand slides from my breasts to brace against the locker as his movements shove me forward. I close my eyes as I take

everything he gives me. We're puzzle pieces fused together. I relish the pleasure he gives me, with its razor-blade edge of pain.

The pressure breaks and a world-shattering climax rolls through me. Eli continues to thrust into me, until his moves become uncoordinated and jerky. His forehead drops to my shoulder, and a tremor runs through him as he finds his own release.

I'm already aching for him to fuck me again.

I'm not sure this wanting him will ever end.

CHAPTER 118

ELI

I could stay here, like this, forever. Just the two of us. Having her in my arms silences all the issues, the problems, the worries, and misunderstandings.

I kiss my way along her throat until I reach her ear. “We should get you dressed before someone finds us.”

Her head turns, lips finding mine for a long, languid kiss. When we finally break apart, I rest my forehead against hers.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I cup her face between my palms and kiss her again, then draw back. “Now for the less romantic part.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to pull out, and you’re going to have to do whatever it takes not to make a mess.”

Her eyes widen, and her lips part.

I chuckle. “I have tissues, but there’s that risk ...”

“Oh my god. That’s so *not* sexy, Eli!”

My chuckle turns into a full-blown laugh. “I know. I’m sorry, but ... on three, okay?”

I pull the packet of tissues from my back pocket and tear it open with my teeth—yes, fine, I’d come prepared for if she didn’t want to use a condom. I wasn’t really going to make her

spend the rest of the night trying to keep from leaking my cum all over the floor. When I have a couple in my hand, I position them near her thigh.

“Ready? Start counting, Hellcat.”

“One ... two ...” She laughs. “This is ridiculous.”

“Adulthood is overrated. It was much easier when we were younger and didn’t give a fuck.” I ease out of her and press the tissues against her pussy. “Hold that there while I figure out what I did with your panties.”

Her body is shaking with laughter as I search around, and finally spot them on the floor. I snatch them up, then kneel in front of her. “Lift your leg.”

She does as I ask, and I slide the silky material over her ankle.

“Now the other.”

I repeat the process and then drag them up her legs and over her ass. She pulls her hand away, leaving the tissues in place.

On my way back upright, I pause to kiss each nipple. A mistake, because once one taut little peak touches my mouth I can’t help but lick and suck at it. Her hand drops into my hair, and she pulls me closer.

“Eli.” My name is a soft exhale and I smile against her skin.

Forcing myself to straighten, I brush my knuckles over her cheek, then fix her dress. As I’m tugging the zipper back up, the doors at the end of the hallway swing open, and drunken

laughter spills through. Arabella stiffens.

“Turn around and lean against the locker,” I whisper.

She spins and I rest my hands either side of her head, and lean closer so I can press my lips to her shoulder.

The chatter and laughter moves closer, and then breaks off.

“Oh!” A female voice. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were here.”

I lift my head. Linda, Maggie, Tina, and Jace are standing a few feet away. Jace meets my gaze and gives a small headshake. Maggie and Tina are gaping at us. Linda doesn’t look surprised to see us here at all.

“The girls wanted to take one last walk around before we left. They badgered me until I agreed to come with them,” Jace says into the silence.

I turn toward them and take Arabella’s hand in mine. “It’s okay. We were just leaving.” I start forward, drawing her along with me.

When we reach the small group, I stop. “Oh, and Maggie?”

Her smile is bright as she looks at me.

“I don’t know what lies you’ve been telling yourself, but even if dating had been my thing back in high school, *you* would never have made the list of girls I’d want to have as a girlfriend.”

I don’t wait to hear her response and pull Arabella out of the

building.

“Back to the prom, or do you want to find the nearest bathroom to clean up?”

“I thought you said you wanted me to stay full of your cum?”

I squeeze her fingers. “I say a lot of things to make you come on my dick.”

She drops my hand and slides her arm around my waist so she can rest her head against my shoulder as we walk along the path.

“Then I’d like to freshen up.”

“Good. That way you can sit on my lap in the ballroom, and I can fuck you again.”

“*In* the ballroom?”

I nod.

“Where everyone is watching?”

“Your skirts will hide what we’re doing. I want you to ride my dick the way you rode my fingers at the Valentine’s Ball.”

“You’re not serious!” Her head comes up from my shoulder and she gapes at me.

I run a finger over her lips. “Totally serious. Didn’t I tell you that you’re never going to forget tonight?”

“Yes, but—”

I slide my finger into her mouth. “Suck my finger.”

Her lips seal around it, cheeks hollowing out as she sucks.

“Eyes on me.”

Her eyelashes lift until her gaze connects with mine.

“Good girl.”

Heat fills her cheeks.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to clean up, then you’re going to come into the ballroom and climb on my lap. You’re going to take my dick out of my pants and slide that hot greedy little pussy down onto it and fuck me to the beat of whatever song is playing.”

Her eyes are wide, but she doesn’t stop sucking on my finger. I pull it free.

“Red or green, Kitten?”

CHAPTER 119

ARABELLA

This isn't sneaking around in the dark. This dare is out in the open, in the light. The thought of getting caught has been a naughty little whisper in my fantasies, but can I really go through with it now that he's offering it to me?

Eli remains silent beside me, waiting for my answer. He doesn't push, doesn't try and convince me either way, just waits. And, I have this sudden lightbulb moment—every dare he's ever given me, I've been in control. I've always had the option to say no. He has never forced me to do anything I didn't want to do.

I lick my lips. "Green."

He smiles. "Go clean up."

"You want to come in with me?"

"If I do, I'll end up fucking you on the sink in front of the mirror."

I shiver at the delicious imagery his words invoke inside my head. "I wouldn't say no to that."

Eli chuckles. "Maybe later."

He leans forward and kisses me once more before stepping away. With a sway of my hips, I walk toward the restroom. Thankfully I'm alone when I enter. I lock myself into the first stall I reach, and clean up the mess we've made. Once I'm

done, I flush the evidence and go to wash my hands.

Eli is waiting for me when I exit. He captures my hand without a word and guides me along the hallway. The prom is still in full swing when we rejoin it. I don't know the name of the song that's playing, but it puts a grin on Eli's face.

Instead of returning to our table, he leads me to one at the back of the room, half hidden in the shadows.

We're really going to do this?

My nervousness must show on my face because he hauls me into his chest and kisses the corner of my mouth. "You can always say red."

I shake my head and smile. "You know that's never going to happen."

"You always did meet my challenges. It's one of the reasons why I found you so intoxicating."

Let it last. Stay drunk on me, Eli Travers. Don't ever lose your taste for me.

He pulls a chair out from under the table and drops down into it. Grasping my skirts in one hand, I move forward to straddle his thighs and settle on his lap.

His eyes never leave my face, the green of his eyes glittering through his half-closed lids. "Unzip me."

I don't move, trapped in his gaze. The fire in his eyes threatens to set every atom of my being aflame. The hard swell of his cock pushes against the material of his pants beneath

me.

We're in a public place. Anyone in the ballroom can see us. The thought of getting caught sends a thrill down my spine.

His hand is on my thigh, under the material, and moves slowly upward toward my thong. My breath hitches when his finger runs along the front of it, deliberately teasing. It feeds the fire burning in my pussy, and I press my lips together to stifle my groan.

He pushes the thong aside and strokes his thumb through my wetness.

"You want me inside you again, don't you, Kitten? It's all you can think about. My dick buried inside you."

I shift my hips restlessly. "What are you doing to me, Eli?"

"Everything. How many orgasms do you think I can give you before you beg me to stop? Take what you want. I'm right here, waiting for you. Unzip me."

My hands eagerly dig under my skirt to find his belt. I unbuckle it and lower his zip and slip my hand inside to wrap my fingers around the hard, velvety length of his shaft.

Eli gives an approving groan. "That's it, baby."

Carefully, I lift and impale myself on his cock. Eyes closed, I sink down to take him, inch by perfect inch, until he's hilt deep. My pussy clenches around him, welcoming him back.

Why do I always feel so empty when he's not fucking me?

I grind down on top of him. He's hard as stone, filling me in a way only he can. I wind my arms around his neck. My lips tease along his jaw before I kiss him. As my tongue darts into his mouth, I gyrate my hips, fucking him where he sits.

Eli growls into my mouth, his hands moving to cradle my ass. The music pulses through the floor of the ballroom, and I move up and down to the beat. Slowly at first, until I find the right rhythm. He breaks the kiss, and bites my bottom lip, tugging it between his teeth, sucking on it, and then lets it go.

As I roll my hips, he mutters something. It takes me a second to realize he's singing along to the lyrics of the song. He's serenading me while we have sex in public. It's one of the sexiest things I've ever had happen to me.

I turn my head to hide the love I'm sure is evident on my face, and my eyes clash with Garrett's. He's watching us, unable to hide his envy.

Oh my god, he knows we're fucking. Has anyone else figured out what we're doing?

"He wants you." Eli rasps in my ear. "He's always wanted you."

I look away from the redheaded man.

"No, Kitten. This is what you want to happen. Let him see what he can't have."

His fingers touch my jaw and turn my face back toward Garrett.

He doesn't look away but keeps his eyes on me. Naked desire is written all over his face.

Eli is right. He *does* want me. The knowledge that he's still watching us isn't as unsettling as it should be. In fact, Eli is right. I *do* like it. I like that he's standing watching while the man I love is fucking me. I like that he's seeing my hips moving as I take Eli's cock as deep as I can.

My body is alive, ablaze with my hunger for Eli. My pussy is soaked because another man is watching my lover run his hands all over me in the crowded room. Circling my hips, I ride him, the sensation of being observed only making me wetter.

"He wants to be the one you're fucking." Eli's hand slides up over my breasts to grip my throat. "Tonight, he'll be dreaming of you like this."

I undulate faster, my breasts bouncing in the bodice of my dress. "Oh."

"Garrett will never get to touch you, though. Not like this."

His grip tightens and squeezes until I have to fight to breathe. Garrett blurs in my vision. I surrender to pleasure as an orgasm slams into me, my eyes rolling back in my head.

CHAPTER 120

ELI

She looks like a fucking goddess with her head thrown back, lips parted, and eyes closed as she writhes on top of me. Her pussy pulses around my dick and I'm half-tempted to come inside her again. Instead, I use my grip on her throat to pull her closer and claim her mouth in a quick hard kiss, swallowing her moans as she comes.

I nip her bottom lip and pull back, my gaze searching out Garrett. He's a step closer, eyes fastened on Arabella's breasts as they bounce, and I know all it would take is a nod from me for him to be right beside us.

That's not going to happen. While I have no problem at all with him watching from a distance, I will not share the woman I love with him. There's only one person I'd be willing to do that with, and he's been gone for a long time.

"Can you feel his eyes on you, Kitten?" I run my thumb over her jaw. "They're hot and hungry. He's watching you fall apart and wishing it's for him. That it's his dick you're soaking with your cum." My other hand smooths up her thigh. "I think you can come again before the song ends, don't you?" My fingers find her clit and I rub a slow circle over it, while I close my teeth over the front of her dress and pull it down to bare one nipple. "Shall we let him see a little more of what he can never have?"

“Eli.” My name is a mixture of a moan and a warning. One that breaks off into a soft cry when I suck the sensitive peak into my mouth.

“Ohhh god.” She swallows against the hand around her throat, writhing against my dick as she attempts to escape from my fingers flicking against her clit. “I can’t ... I can’t ... no more.” She pants the words, and I ignore them, sucking hard on the nipple between my lips.

Her entire body goes rigid, back arched and head thrown back, as she comes apart for me again. Her breathing is raspy, fast-paced, breasts heaving as she sucks air into her starved lungs when I drop my hand away from her throat.

“Stand up.”

She blinks at me, her eyes dazed. “What?”

I wrap my hands around her waist and lift her off me. “Stand right there.” I push my hand beneath her dress and press the silk of her thong into her pussy. “They’re so fucking wet. Take them off.”

“H-here?”

“Right here. Take them off and hand them to me.”

Her chest moves as she sucks in a deep breath, and moves to tug her dress back over her breast.

“No, Kitten. He hasn’t seen enough yet. Let him look at your nipple. The way it’s wet from my tongue.” I reach out and pinch it, smiling at Garrett. His tongue snakes over his

lips. “Do you want him to see your pussy?” I push a finger inside her. “Do you want him to watch while I fuck you?”

“N-No.”

“Then take your panties off and give them to me.” I pull my fingers free and lean back.

She balances one hand on my leg while she pulls the panties down beneath her skirt. I tuck my dick back into my pants while she lifts first one leg, then the other, and then straightens, panties clutched in her fingers.

I hold out a hand. “Give them to me.”

Her tongue snakes out to sweep over her lips, and she places the wadded-up ball into my waiting palm. I hold her gaze and lift them to my face, inhaling.

“You smell turned on, hot and wet and sexy as fuck.”

Her breath hitches. I smile and stand, fixing the bodice of her dress so her nipple is covered. “Come with me.” I link my fingers with hers and walk across the ballroom.

When we reach Garrett, I stop. “It was good to catch up with you again.”

His eyes jerk from Arabella to me.

“Bye, Garrett.” Arabella’s cheeks are cherry red, and she won’t look at him.

His gaze moves over her, and he licks his lips again, then looks back at me. I reach out and push something into his

pocket, then take his hand in mine and shake it. “I probably won’t see you before we leave tomorrow, so have a good one.”

I wink at him and wrap my arm around Arabella’s waist. “Let’s go, Kitten.”

When we’re outside, Arabella looks up at me. “What did you give him?”

“Your panties, soaked in your cum.”

Her jaw drops. I smirk.

“What? I thought it was the least I could do. He can’t have you or your pussy, so I gave him the next best thing.”

“That’s ... I ... You ...” she shakes her head. “I have no words.”

CHAPTER 121

ARABELLA

Eli leads me toward the dorm building through the dark. My cheeks are still hot with the blush I'd given Garrett. I still can't believe Eli gave him my thong like a consolation prize.

We stop inside the doorway, and he pulls me in for a kiss.

I smile. "Is it bedtime?"

"No."

"Then why are we going back to our room?"

"I have no intention of letting you sleep."

I mock gasp. "Mr. Travers, are you trying to ruin my reputation?"

Eli grins. "I think it's a little too late for that after what just happened in the ballroom, Miss Gray."

"What will the faculty think?"

"I don't give a fuck what they think." He takes my hand and guides me to our room.

Once we're both inside, I wind my arms around his neck. Eli leans down and kisses my lips. I sigh into his mouth, my tongue seeking to duel with his, and we move in a tangle of limbs toward the bed.

Eli stops when we reach it. "Undress for me, Ari."

“What happened to having sex in the back of a car or a cheap motel?” I tease. “I thought you said that’s what happens at a prom.”

“We’re going to make our own magic right here, Hellcat.” He lowers the zip on the back of my dress, the sides falling open.

I let go of his neck and step back to let the bodice fall. Eli’s attention drops to my exposed breasts. The look of unadulterated lust on his face sends a wave of satisfaction through me.

“Take it all off. I want you naked.”

“That seems a little unfair.”

Eli chuckles. “I promise it will be worth it.”

“Promises, promises.” With a tug on the material, I ease it down past my waist and over my hips. A little wiggle has the dress pooling around my ankles in a black and silver puddle. There’s a fluttering deep in my chest and in my stomach. I feel breathless as I stare into his eyes.

Eli is right.

I’m never going to forget tonight. I’ll carry the memory of every second of our time together to my dying day. No matter what happens between us now, I’ll always have this.

CHAPTER 122

ELI

“Get into bed.” I place my hands on her shoulders and turn her to face the bed, then press a kiss to her shoulder. “I’m just going to lock up and then I’ll join you.”

I cross the room to the door and twist the lock, then turn. A smile pulls my lips up as Arabella climbs onto the bed, and my hand hovers over the light switch. I’m tempted to leave the light on, so I can look my fill of her, but I need darkness for the next part of the evening. If I can see her, I’ll change my mind.

“Are you going to stand there all night?”

Her voice intrudes on the thoughts whirling around my head and I blink, refocusing.

“Just admiring the view.” I snap off the light, plunging the room into darkness, and wait for my eyes to adjust before stepping into the center of the room.

I strip out of my shirt and pants, peel off my underwear and then slide under the covers beside her. She immediately rolls toward me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“Mmm.” Her lips brush over my chest. “You’re finally naked.”

I tangle my fingers into her hair and gently tug her head back so I can kiss her. “And you’re finally in my bed.”

“I’ve been in your bed all week.”

I kiss along her jaw. “I know ... but tonight is different.”

Her sigh is a warm caress of air against my cheek. “Because it’s our last night here.”

“Because it’s our last night here.” I repeat the words back to her.

“Eli, I—”

I cover her mouth with mine, swallowing whatever she is about to say, and ease her onto her back, so I can settle between her legs. She winds her arms around my neck, while we kiss. A kiss that tastes of hunger, of desire, and a little desperation.

Reaching between our bodies, I fist my dick and place it against her pussy. She’s still wet from riding me in the ballroom, and I slip inside her with ease. She moans softly, legs lifting to wrap around my hips, and I rock slowly into her.

My lips kiss a path over her cheeks, along her jaw, and brush against her lips.

“I need you to listen to me.”

“I’m listening.” Her voice is a breathless moan.

“I’m serious. I need you to listen to what I’m about to say. No interrupting, no arguing, just listen.”

Her fingers slide over my face, palming my cheek. “You want to have a conversation ... right *now*?”

“Right now. While I have your full attention.” I circle my hips, driving my dick deeper. “I need you to hear me, Ari. Can you do that?”

“No?”

I laugh quietly. “Try.” I stroke a finger over her lips. “When you turned up at the cabin before Christmas, I was so fucking angry. With you for walking away from me ten years ago. With Kellan for dying and leaving me. But really, I was angry with myself for letting it happen. For not fighting to keep you. For not listening to what you were telling me.”

Her lips part, and I press my fingers against them.

“No, I’m not done.” I lower my head to kiss along her shoulder. “I fucked up again in January and lost another chance to win you back. Coming here is our do-over. My chance to get everything right. My chance to remind you of everything good we had. My chance to prove that we should be together.”

“Eli—”

“Still not done.” I reach back and pull her hands away from my hair, and pin them on the pillow above her head, while I move in and out of her body in slow, languid thrusts.

“I don’t want you to say anything, okay? Just listen to me. I love you. I always have. Back when we were stupid teenagers fucking around. Five years ago, when I saw you at my dad’s funeral. At Christmas when you told me it was over. I’ve always loved you.”

She draws in a breath, and I cover her mouth with one hand.

“Not a word, Ari. I’m not telling you because I want you to say it back to me. I *don’t* want you to. Not yet.”

I lick my lips. This is where things are going to get messy.

“Because I love you so fucking much, I need you to do something for me. Tomorrow, I want you to go back to L.A. with Miles and Ivan. I want you away from here, away from me.”

She makes a muffled sound of protest against my palm.

“Not forever, Kitten. But I need you to think about what you want without me around, and without being weighed down by the memories of this place. Go back to your apartment and think about whether being with me is something you could see in your future, or whether you just got wrapped up in being back here.”

My lips replace my palm and I kiss her again, tongue stroking against hers, mimicking the slow and steady thrusts of my dick.

“Don’t tell me you love me, Ari ... because if you do that right now, I’m not going to be able to let you go.” I lift my head. “Can you do that for me?”

This close to her, I can just about make out her features. She’s gazing up at me, lips parted and eyes wide.

“You’re so fucking beautiful ... and if you tell me you love me, I won’t have the willpower to walk away in the morning.

But we need to do this. Do you understand? I need you to go back home and make a decision with a clear head.” My lips find her ear. “Red or green, Kitten? Can you do this one last thing for me?”

She pulls her hands free from my grip and touches my face, strokes her fingers over my lips, along my nose, and my jaw.

“Green.” The word comes out a little choked, but it’s clear.

I smile against her fingers. “Good girl.”

The alarm goes off on my cell, and I hit the stop button before it disturbs Arabella. Her body is wrapped around mine and it takes me a while to ease out of her embrace. I don’t want to wake her because I know if she opens her eyes, everything I said in the dark won’t matter. I won’t be able to walk away.

She doesn’t stir when I finally extract myself, and I dress quickly and move the suitcases I packed the day before out into the hallway before returning to the room.

There’s a Churchill Bradley notepad on the desk and a pen, so I pull it toward me and leave her a note.

Ari,

You have my number. Call me when you are ready. I’ll come to you. We’ll work it out.

I love you.

Eli

With one last lingering look at the woman in the bed, I step out of the door and pull my cases down to Bret's room. A single quiet tap is all it takes for the door to swing open, and he casts a critical glance over me.

“Are you ready?”

I nod. “Let's do this.”

The same redhead is in the room when I enter.

“Gloria, you met Eli the other night.”

She tosses me a smile but doesn't move her attention from the laptop in front of her.

“Are you sure this is going to work?”

“He didn't try anything last night, so he must be waiting for you to leave. There's no way he broke out of jail just to taste freedom. That's not how he thinks. And from the information Kevin gave us, he's got this all planned out.” He glances at his wristwatch. “Okay, let's get this done. Take off your shoes.”

CHAPTER 123

ARABELLA

The second my groping hand doesn't find Eli's solid, warm body beside me on the bed, my eyes snap open. I lift my head. The suitcases he'd had beside the door are missing. There's a note on the pillow beside mine. I snatch it up and read it.

Ari,

You have my number. Call me when you are ready. I'll come to you. We'll work it out.

I love you.

Eli

I don't need to think about it. I'm ready now. I love him. I've always loved him.

What the fuck am I doing?

I let this place suck me back into my old insecurities and fears. Eli is what I want. A future with him. Us together like it's supposed to be because he's the only man I've ever loved. The burning urge to confess everything drives me out of bed. I promised him I would wait and think, but I don't need to.

I've never been surer of anything in my life.

I find my cell, but when I call his number, his phone is switched off.

How long has he been gone? Is he heading back to the

cabin? Maybe I can catch him on the way.

I snatch up a pair of discarded sweatpants and a t-shirt hauling them on. Hurrying to the door, I swing it open and jog along the corridor.

Garrett is emerging from his room as I pass his door. We stare at each other. A recollection of the events last night has my cheeks flushing, but I push my embarrassment aside. His cheeks are as red as mine feel.

“I need to find Eli.”

“I think I saw him head to his car about an hour ago.”

Panic that I’m going to be too late tightens my chest. “I need to talk to him.”

“Is everything okay?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not.”

“Is there anything I can do?” He looks concerned, but his voice sounds hopeful.

“Thanks, but no.” I move to Miles’ door and bang on it with my fist.

A full minute passes before it swings open and he appears wrapped in a white robe rubbing his eyes with one hand. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

“I need Ivan to drive me to the cabin so I can tell him I love him.” I stumble over the words in my rush to get them out.

“You love Ivan?”

“No, you idiot. *Eli*.”

He scowls at me. “Bella, you’re not making any sense.”

I take a breath and reply slowly, carefully enunciating each word for my clearly hungover friend. “Eli left. I need to tell him that I love him, and I need you to help me achieve that. I should have told him sooner.”

“You should let him go. Talk to him in a few days.” Ivan appears behind his fiancé. “Let things between you settle down.”

Miles twists to look at him. “Are you crazy? She could change her mind all over again.”

“Please, Ivan.” I inject a note of pleading into my voice. “I need to do this.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Fine! If you won’t help me, I’ll find someone else to take me.” I turn to Garrett, who’s still watching us. “Can you—”

“I’ll drive you.” Ivan concedes. “Get dressed and packed. We’ll have breakfast and then follow him to the cabin. I am not breaking any speed limits getting there.”

I give him a quick hug. “Thank you.”

He grunts. “Go, I have a call to make. Miles, you can shower first.”

As much as I want to jump into the car and tear off after Eli, I know Ivan is right. We need to get ready to leave first. I step

back and let them close the door.

“Is there anything I can do?” Garrett offers from where he’s still hovering in the corridor.

I walk back along the hallway to my room. “No but thank you for being my friend.”

“I never had a chance with you, did I?” His voice is subdued.

“I’m sorry.”

“You make sure Eli treats you right.”

I smile at him. As much as I like him, Garrett was never meant for me, and I think, deep down, he knows that too. He nods and turns, heading along the hallway. I hurry back into the room and pack.

Miles glances at me from the front passenger seat of the car. “You’ve had a week to announce your feelings to him. You know I love you, but why do you have to be so weird?”

“I couldn’t. Not while we were at the Academy. There’s too much bad history between us there. It’s as though I couldn’t physically tell him I loved him, because admitting it could jinx it somehow.”

“You were afraid of dooming your love.” Ivan keeps his eyes on the road as he drives.

He’s been keeping steadfastly to the speed limit and taking

things slow, no matter how much I beg him to speed up. I can almost *feel* the distance between Eli and me growing. It's like Ivan doesn't want me to catch up to him.

“That doesn't sound crazy to you?”

“Many of my family believe in curses and misfortune. I understand more than you know.”

I huff out a shaky breath. “Eli told me last night that he loves me.”

Miles arches an eyebrow at me. “And you didn't think to tell him then?”

“He didn't want me to say the words back. Told me to go back to L.A. and to think about what I wanted.”

Ivan's attention flicks to the rear-view mirror as we take a bend in the road. “Maybe you should have done exactly that. You need time to think clearly and with less emotion. We could turn around now—”

“I'm done thinking about it. I don't want to waste any more time. I ...” The rest of the words die on my lips. My gaze is locked on the back of a car that's smashed into a tree.

“Is that—” Miles says.

“Eli's car,” I reply, unable to look away from the wreck as Ivan slows down and passes it.

My stomach hollows with fear.

Ivan brings the car to a stop, and I'm out of the door before

he even has the engine switched off. I sprint toward the wreck. Fragments of broken glass are scattered all over the ground. The front of the vehicle is twisted and crumpled from the force it must have hit the tree with.

“Eli!” I scream his name, flying around to the driver’s side.

The airbag has deployed but there is no sign of Eli. My gaze latches onto the smear of red across it.

He must be hurt. Where is he? Oh, god, no.

I scramble around to the front and frantically search for him, but there’s nothing. No hint that he’s been there at all.

“He’s not here.” My voice is frantic. “Where is he? Why isn’t he here?”

“I need to call Bret.” Ivan strides back toward his car.

“Bret?” Miles repeats, as we follow him. “We need to call the authorities. Maybe he’s been taken to a hospital.”

Something about the older man’s grim demeanor sets alarm bells ringing in my head. He hadn’t wanted me to come after Eli. He’s deliberately driven slowly. Did he know something was going to happen?

I grab his arm. “Ivan, what aren’t you telling me?”

“I think Eli is in danger.”

“No shit.” Miles gestures back at the wrecked vehicle. “He was in a car accident.”

I don’t take my eyes off Ivan. “Why do you need to speak to

Bret? What does he have to do with all this? Did he do this to Eli? Tell me what you know!”

He hesitates, then nods. “Evan Ridley escaped prison just before Christmas.”

A wave of dizziness hits me, and I sway on my feet. “What?”

“Bret thought he might go after you and Eli at the Academy.”

No, no, no. That psychopath is free? He’s been on the run for months, and no one told us?

Mile pales, and his mouth drops open. “What the fuck?”

I lean back against the car. My legs are shaking, my heart is beating so fast, I’m dizzy. Thoughts circle in my head. “Bret isn’t a priest, is he?”

Ivan shakes his head. “No, he’s a federal officer. He’s the one who persuaded me to get you all to the school.”

The nausea rolling in my stomach intensifies. “You put us in danger without telling us. You *used* us as bait?” My voice is shrill.

“He swore to me you would all be safe. All the staff and security, bar your old teachers, are also federal officers.” His gaze shifts to the car pulling up behind ours. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

Two men get out and walk towards us. I recognize them as campus guards I’d seen patrolling Churchill Bradley

Academy. Disguised federal agents.

The cold bony talons of terror clutch my heart. A hand pressed to my mouth, I lurch away from Ivan's car and barely make it to the grassy embankment before the contents of my stomach ends up at my feet. I take in a breath, and drop to my knees, waiting for the urge to vomit to pass.

This can't be happening.

Evan has Eli.

The man I love has been kidnapped, and I have no clue where he's been taken.

CHAPTER 124

ELI

Laughter, voices, and music slowly replace the floating blackness I've been encased in. I groan. My head is pounding, throbbing like a drum, and my chest feels like it's been hit by a train.

It takes a couple of attempts to open my eyes ... *one* eye. The other won't open and when I try to lift a hand to rub at it, that won't move either.

"What the fuck?" The words come out raspy and low.

"Oh, you're awake!" A female voice, light and excited ... *familiar*.

It's difficult to focus. My vision keeps blurring, and I only have one eye to see out of, so my spatial awareness is lacking, but I twist my head in the direction of the voice.

A neat black jacket covering a cream blouse comes into view. A knee-length black skirt ... my gaze slips down further. Legs clad in dark pantyhose, and flat black pumps.

"Am I in the hospital?" She doesn't *look* like a nurse, but my pounding head suggests she could be part of the administration.

"Don't be silly." Her laugh sends a stab of pain through my skull.

I lift my gaze to her face, and it takes a moment or two for

my mind to recognize what I'm seeing. Even then, my response is sluggish.

“What’s going on?”

“The airbag deploying must have rattled your brains. Poor dear.” One hand, tipped with red talons, pats my cheek. “Let me go and tell him you’re awake.”

“Him? Him, who?”

But she doesn't reply, and I'm left alone. I try to wipe my eye again, but still can't move my arm, and a careful look down tells me why.

I'm seated on what seems to be a kitchen chair and my wrists are strapped to the arms with cable ties. And the sight brings everything rushing back to me.

I'd been driving back to the cabin when a car skipped the junction and hit the side of mine. It sent me careening into the nearest tree. The collision must have triggered the airbag and knocked me out.

That meant ...

“Hello, Eli.”

The blood freezes in my veins and I can't do anything but watch as Evan Ridley comes to a stop in front of me. He doesn't look much different from the last time I'd set eyes on him—during the trial for the murder of my best friend. He's still slim, almost boyish looking. The only differences are the shaved head and the scar crossing one cheek.

If he does manage to take you by surprise, stay calm. We won't be far away.

Bret's words rattle around my head. This is what we've planned for. I have to see this through to the end, and fucking hope that the tracking device they put in my shoe hasn't been found.

"Evan." My voice is rough but calm.

"I didn't think we'd ever get to sit down and talk again. You've been very difficult to find." He drags a chair over and settles on it, crossing one ankle over his knee. "But my pet here assured me that if I was patient you'd come." He smiles. "And here you are."

"You could have just called."

"And have you refuse to take my call?" He tuts. "That's not how it works, you know that."

"How *what* works, exactly?"

If he takes you, keep him talking. Give us a chance to get to you.

Evan scowls. "Don't pretend like you never knew the game we were playing."

"We were playing a game?"

"Don't fucking act innocent, Eli. Every girl I liked; you fucked them. Every friend I had, you wanted them. So, I changed the rules of the game."

“I didn’t take any of your friends.”

My head snaps sideways when his fist connects with it, blood spraying outward. “Don’t fucking lie!” Spit leaves his lips with his scream. “You wanted Jace. You took Zoey. You fucked Maggie and Lacy. Even my pet here craves your fucking dick.” He swings out a hand and knocks the blonde standing quietly beside him back a step.

My gaze flicks to her. “Why are you doing this? You can see he’s fucking insane, can’t you?”

I know the second the words leave my lips that I shouldn’t have said them. Evan launches himself from the seat and comes at me, raining blows over my face and chest.

“You were so fucking perfect. Father, mother, son. The perfect family. Happy, rich, wanting for nothing. Always taking trips, always laughing. What did I fucking have? My mother was dead, my father didn’t give a shit. I had one friend. *One*. And. You. Took. Him!”

I can’t think properly, my head reeling from the constant punches, but I force myself to respond. “Kellan wasn’t—” The words come out thick and slurred.

“Not Kellan!” He hits me again.

The coppery taste of blood fills my mouth. The eye I was able to see out of is slowly losing focus, but I fight against it, try to keep it open.

“Who? Who did I take from you?”

“Jace. You took him to your birthday party. *Him*, not me. When he came back, he was always talking about how nice you were. How you weren’t the piece of shit I told him you were. He wanted to be your fucking friend.”

“Evan, I—”

“And then Zoey. Zoey was *my* friend, *my* girl. But she refused to play the fucking game. She wouldn’t break you. She had to go.”

In my head, I’m back in the chapel, with him screaming similar words at me. Kellan is on the altar behind me, the colored reflections from the stained glass spilling over him.

Hold it together, Eli. My best friend’s voice whispers through my mind. *You have to hold it together.*

I’m trying. I’m fucking trying ... but my vision is swimming in red. I no longer feel the blows hitting me, and I’m slowly losing the fight to stay conscious.

“What do ... what do you want?” I force the words out. I can’t feel my lips, I don’t know how much sense I’m making.

“What do I want?” Evan stills and straightens. “What do I want?” His voice changes. Becomes soft, calm and clear. “There’s only one thing I’ve ever wanted.”

I force my eye to open and focus on him. “What’s that?”

“You dead.”

It happens almost in slow motion, or at least that’s how it seems to my punch-drunk head.

He pulls out a gun.

The blonde beside him claps, a smile stretching her lips.

I'm trapped, strapped to the chair with no way of avoiding the bullet, but I try ...

I brace my feet against the floor and shove.

Too little, too late.

White hot pain explodes in my chest.

The world spins.

My head hits something solid.

"You're such a fucking hot mess." Kellan rolls his eyes and holds out a hand to help me up. "Why can't you do anything without me needing to save your ass?"

"I was doing fine until you died."

"Which proves my point." He nods toward the door. "Want to grab a seat, and I'll get our food?"

"Sure."

The door swings open to the cafeteria. It's emptier than usual, but that's fine. I fucking hate the way everyone stares when I walk in. The students who are there seem subdued, their eyes downcast as I walk past and drop to my usual seat. Kellan joins me there a few minutes later.

He pushes a mug of coffee across the table to me. "We should probably talk about what happens next."

“And what’s that? ... Kellan? ... Kell?”

But he doesn’t answer me ... because he’s not there, and slowly all sounds and images fade until only blackness remains.

CHAPTER 125

ARABELLA

I march up to the man surrounded by FBI agents, rage pumping through my veins. Bret watches my approach, his expression wary. The second I reach him, I swing back my arm and punch him in the face. Shouts break out around me, and my arms are grabbed roughly to prevent me from assaulting him further.

“No, it’s okay. Let her go,” he tells them, his hand covering his nose.

“You son of a bitch.” I snarl the words. “If anything happens to Eli, I’m holding you responsible.”

“You’re understandably upset—”

“Upset? You used us without our knowledge.”

He dabs at the trickle of blood coming from his nose with his fingers. “We had eyes on you the whole time.”

“Then how the fuck did Evan get his hands on Eli?”

“Bella, give him a chance to explain.” Miles touches my arm.

I glare at him. “Where’s Ivan?”

“In his car. I don’t want to talk to him right now.”

“We know where they are,” Bret says.

My head snaps back to him. “Where?”

“A farmhouse about a quarter of a mile from here. Eli agreed to wear a tracker. Our team has only just got there. They haven’t had a chance to scope out the area yet and figure out a plan. I had to come and collect you.” He shakes his head. “You were supposed to be far away from here, Arabella. Eli promised he’d make sure of that.”

His words send a wave of disbelief through me. “Eli knew about this the whole time?”

“No, just since yesterday.”

“And he what ... forgot to mention it?”

Bret takes a step backward. “I asked him not to.”

“What the fuck?” I raise my fist again. This time it’s Miles who stops me.

Eli knew about this, and he kept it from me?

He made love to me over and over last night, knowing that the man who killed his friends was roaming around free. It has to be the reason why he was so adamant about me going back to L.A.

He *knew* helping the FBI was a risk. That something could go wrong. He kept me from the danger, only to walk into it himself.

“Why aren’t you at the farmhouse rescuing him?”

Bret glances away from me. “Because Ridley has hostages, and there are protocols we have to follow.”

“What kind of protocols?”

“We need to find out what he wants?”

“You know what he wants!” I scream at him. “And now he’s got it!”

Bret hesitates, looking away.

I narrow my eyes.

“He made contact just before Ivan called me.” Bret’s jaw tenses before he meets my stare again. “He wants you to go to him. He says if you go, he’ll release one of his prisoners.”

I should be surprised, but I’m not. After all these years of ensuring I received Zoey’s beloved white lilies, I know I’ve always been on the psycho’s mind, even when he was locked up behind bars.

“And if I say no?”

Bret sighs. “He’ll execute the couple.”

“She’s not going.” Miles grabs my arm. “Bella, tell him you aren’t going.”

I swallow hard and give him a weak smile. “I can’t do that, Miles.”

He shakes his head. “Evan is a maniac. He’ll kill you.”

“He has Eli.” My voice trembles.

I have to do this. If I give myself time to think, I’ll let fear hold me back.

Evan has put me through this before, but I'm older and stronger now. He wants us to play his game, and I'll do it if that means saving the man I love.

"Eli wouldn't want you to put yourself in danger." Miles tugs on my arm. "Bella, are you listening to me? He told you to go back to L.A. He wanted to keep you safe."

"I don't have any choice."

His expression morphs into anger. "Of course, you have a choice!"

"If I don't go, Evan will kill them."

"He could kill *you*. I can't lose you, too."

My gaze meets Bret's, and I nod. "I love you, Miles."

"Arabella—"

"Please take him away."

Bret lifts a hand and two officers come and take hold of Miles and escort him away.

I turn back to Bret. "What do you want me to do?"

"So, your name isn't really Grace?" I glance toward the redheaded woman walking beside me. My anger heated up the second I saw her. Bret had kept his distance, so I couldn't punch him a second time.

She flashes me a smile. "It's Gloria, actually."

“Did the fashion house know you were an FBI agent?”

“No, they didn’t have a clue. I was planted at your work to keep an eye on you. I thought making friends with you would be the easiest way to do that, but you had other ideas. Bret never warned me you were the wary type.”

I frown. “But you started at the office way before Evan escaped.”

“We knew someone was sending you flowers. I was there to track them down. You weren’t supposed to know any of this. Then Ridley escaped.”

She’s been watching me for months, and I didn’t have any idea.

“We’re here.” Gloria stops and turns to face me. “This is as far as I can go. You’ll see the farmhouse. Remember, we can hear everything on the microphone you’re wearing. If things go south, say the word tomb, and we’ll come running.”

I nod, a nervous breath whooshing out of me. “Okay.”

She steps to the left and stops behind a tree. Other agents are hidden and in position. I should feel safe, but I don’t. Not even with the bullet proof vest I’m wearing under my top.

Pace steady, I continue along the path until the farmhouse comes into view. The wooden gate leading up to it is flanked by two enormous pine trees. Chickens peck at the ground and scatter in my wake as I walk past them. A horse is grazing in a field ringed with white fences on my left. It’s peaceful and

quiet.

Too quiet.

No one comes to greet me. There's no sign of anyone.

I pause on the bottom step of the wooden porch that spans the entire front side of the building. Music is coming from the inside. It sounds like someone is having a party.

My mouth is dry. I lick my lips and suck in a breath, then walk up the steps toward the front door, just as a scream erupts from inside.

I flinch at the sound, and it takes me a second to realize it's not screaming, but someone shouting. I pull open the door and step inside. The smell hits me first, a strong metallic scent in the air. I've taken three steps into the hall when I see the bodies on the floor.

He killed them. Evan shot the farmer and his wife even before I got here.

My body is frozen. I can't move. My heart is pounding wildly. I can't look away from the bodies.

Eli, I need to find Eli.

I force my legs to move.

The sound of a gunshot rips through the air.

No.

I move without thought. When I burst into the room, everything seems to slow down.

Eli is tied to a chair, which is upturned on the floor. His face is a bloodied mess from a beating, and there's blood everywhere. His eyes are closed, and he's not moving.

Is he dead?

Did Evan kill him?

Oh my god, is he dead?

Am I too late?

My bottom lip trembles. "Eli?"

He doesn't move.

I'm too late.

The man in the room turns at the sound of my voice.

He raises his gun.

At the same time, there's movement from my left. I recognize Linda a split second before I see the knife in her hand. Lunging back out of her way, all those years of self-defense lessons take over.

I grab her wrist and pull her in front of me. With a hard shove, I send her sideways straight into Evan. The force of her slamming into him is enough to send him backward. He loses his balance and tumbles over the chair Eli is tied to.

My eyes stay glued to the gun as it flies out of his hand. I scramble after it and pick it up. When I spin back to face the room, Evan is on his feet and the knife is in his hand.

This monster has Zoey and Kellan's blood on his hands.

He's taken Eli from me.

This needs to end.

I have to stop him before he claims another life.

Finger on the trigger, I fire into his chest. He jerks as the bullet hits him. The second shot knocks him off his feet.

I cross the room and stand over him. His eyes meet mine and he smiles.

"You won't do it."

I squeeze the trigger.

I can't look away.

Blood drips from his mouth. The breath rattles in his lungs. His eyes turn glassy.

I stare down at him. I can pinpoint the moment he loses the battle.

Evan is dead. I killed him.

Eli is dead.

No, no, no.

My limbs are weak. I'm shaking.

Darkness dances on the edge of my vision.

An ear-piercing shriek deafens me and a second later, something hard rams into me, and I fall backward. The gun flies from my hand.

Pain detonates through the back of my skull as it smashes

into something hard. The floor rushes up to meet me.

A gunshot rings out a second before I float away into complete and utter darkness.

CHAPTER 126

MILES

“Miles, you can’t go in there. It’s dangerous.”

I struggle out of Ivan’s vice-like grip on my arm. “She’s my fucking friend. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you. If she’s dead ...”

I shove at his chest, and send him staggering backward, then turn and take off toward the building, ignoring his shout for me to stop. He put her in danger, put us *all* in danger. I’m not sure I can ever forgive him for this, even if he does believe he was doing the right thing.

It’s chaos inside the farmhouse. People are everywhere, shouting orders.

The first thing I see when I enter the building are the two corpses by the table on the floor. My chest and shoulders are tight, a panic attack dancing at the edge of my control. For a second, the bodies are superimposed by Kellan sprawled out on the altar.

Not Arabella too. Please No, not her too.

Panic tries to choke me as I run into the next room. Bret is standing at the edge of a group of agents. There are more bodies on the floor.

The sight and smell of all the blood has bile burning its way up my throat.

Someone is screaming for an ambulance. For one brief second, I catch sight of Eli. His face is swollen, disfigured, and fear twists my guts.

An agent is crouched over him, but he's not moving.

My gaze is frantically sweeping the room, seeking out Arabella. I lock onto red hair. The female agent who had walked part of the way to the farmhouse with her. She's crouched over something. My eyes dip down.

Blonde hair.

My best friend is curled on her side on the hardwood floor, eyes closed, face pale.

"Bella!" I roar her name and push past the people in my way. "No. No."

"She's breathing," The redheaded woman assures me. "It looks like she hit her head on the coffee table as she went down. It could have been much worse. The woman was about to shoot her. If I'd got here half a second later ..."

I take Arabella's cold hand in mine. "Bella? I'm here."

"We need an ambulance," someone shouts.

More men rush in with stretchers. I'm pushed out of the way as the medics go to work.

Five bodies.

Three males and two females.

Shots to the chest and head.

Suspected concussion.

Voices wash over me, but all my focus is on the slender blonde who has never looked as fragile as she does now.

Images flash through my head.

Eli and Bella dancing at the prom. Her happy smile whenever she looked his way. The sparkle in her eyes whenever he challenged her. She never got to tell him she loved him.

My throat is thick with tears as I follow the medics as they carry her out. I feel sick to my stomach. Ivan watches me, but I ignore him.

In silence and shrouded in sorrow, I climb into the back of the ambulance to travel to the hospital with Arabella.

CHAPTER 127

ARABELLA

Consciousness tugs at the darkness cocooning me. I don't want to open my eyes. It's safe in the dark. Only pain awaits me in the light. But someone is insisting I wake up. A voice I recognize, and I struggle through the fog and force my lids to lift. The light above me is stark and bright. A dull pain throbs through my head, and I close my eyes again.

Where am I?

My hand moves restlessly on top of the blanket. Something warm covers it.

“Eli?” My voice is croaky. Why does my throat feel raw? Have I been shouting? *Screaming?*

“No, it's me.”

Miles. But he sounds odd.

“Where am I?”

“The hospital. Do ... do you remember what happened?”

Hands hold me down. I try to fight them. There's a sting in my arm, and coldness washes through me.

My thoughts are jumbled, and my head aches. “Where's Eli?”

Miles is silent.

Another memory stirs.

Blood. So much blood. I can smell it.

I don't want to open my eyes. If I do, it's going to make this real, and I'm not sure I can live with it if I do.

Tremors rock my body. "Miles, where is Eli?"

His hand squeezes mine. "I'm sorry, Bella. I'm so fucking sorry."

Eli is on the floor, unmoving. He's dead. Evan killed him.

Hands hold me down. I'm screaming and screaming. Voices try to soothe me, but they can't break through my anguish. It's eating me alive.

A hot tear rolls down my cheek. "Please tell me this is a bad dream."

"I wish I could."

My future without him looks bleak and empty. I can't not have him in my life. He's my Nasty Little Monster. My whisper in the dark. The man who has my heart.

Everything hurts. My head. My heart. My soul. A million different emotions clog my throat.

A door creaks open. "Miss Gray, you're awake."

"I'll wait outside." The warmth of Miles' hand slips away from mine.

I open my eyes slowly. They adjust to the light, just in time to see him leave. I lift my hand and scrub the tears from my cheeks. When I'm alone, I'll grieve properly.

“That’s the first time your friend has left your side since they brought you in.” The nurse smiles at me kindly. “How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts.”

“You’ve been in and out of it for the past three days. We had to give you something to keep you calm, so everything might be a little fuzzy. We didn’t want the stress you’ve been under to harm the babies.”

A roaring sound fills my ears, and my breath locks in my throat. “W-what did you just say?”

I can’t have heard her correctly.

“Every time you woke up, you’ve been very anxious and upset. So, we had to give you something to keep you calm. We didn’t want the stress you’ve been under to harm the babies,” she repeats.

“Babies? Me? Babies?” I can barely get the words out. My heart stops ... starts ... stops again, before taking off in rapid flight against my ribs.

Understanding ripples over her expression. “You didn’t know?”

My head spins. When was the last time I had my period? Everything has been a blur since Christmas. Eli didn’t use a condom when I stayed at the cabin. I told him I was taking contraception.

What about when we hooked up in New York? I forgot to

fill my prescription after leaving the cabin. I had sworn off sex and men. There was no point in taking it when I wasn't sleeping with anyone.

And then Eli turned up ...

A baby.

Eli's baby.

My hand creeps slowly up to cradle my abdomen through the blanket. "Can you tell how far along I am?"

The nurse nods. "You're about ten weeks along."

"Babies? You said babies." I swallow. "Two?"

Her smile returns. "Twins."

"Could I have a scan to see them?"

"I can arrange it, and we'll get you an ultrasound photograph to keep."

"Thank you." I lower my gaze to the blanket. "I'd like to be alone if that's okay."

"The doctor will be around in an hour. If you need anything, just press the buzzer."

Something inside me cracks the second she steps out of the door. I bow my head, and the tears I've kept at bay release in a torrent. They stream down my cheeks to drip down my chin. Sobs rip through my body and I twist on to my side so I can bury my face into the pillow and cry.

Eli is gone, but new life is growing inside me. My heart

feels like it's constricting inside my chest.

"I promise I'm going to love you." I whisper. "I'll love you twice as much as any other mom. I'll love you just as fiercely as your daddy would have. I'll protect you. I promise."

Eli should be here with me.

I should have him at my side.

The knowledge that we have created something between us is bittersweet. They will never know their father because of Evan Ridley. But at least they won't have to live in fear of that monster ever coming back.

I don't hear the door opening again.

"Hey, Kitten."

CHAPTER 128

ELI

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

I ignore the snapped question and continue trying to dress.

“You’ve been shot. You can’t just get up and walk around. Get back in the fucking bed.”

I glance over at Bret. “Unless you’re planning to arrest me and handcuff me in place, fuck off.”

“Eli, you need to rest.”

“I need to see Ari.” Something shifts in his expression, and I ditch trying to put on socks in favor of glaring at him. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. She’s fine. It’s just ...”

“Just. What?”

“She was freaking out because she saw you on the ground. I tried to tell her you were alive, but she was too far gone and wasn’t listening.”

“Where is she?”

“A few rooms down.”

“Get the fuck out of my way.” I use my good arm to push to my feet, grunting at the pain that shoots through me.

“Eli—”

“Do not fucking *Eli* me.”

“You know ... if you’d left the vest on, like I told you, you wouldn’t have been shot at all.”

“If I’d left the vest on, I wouldn’t have survived the car crash. He’d have killed me right there.”

“We wouldn’t have let that happen.”

I snort. “Right, sure. Like you protected the poor couple and their son who were in the farmhouse. Because you got there so quickly, didn’t you?”

“That’s not fair. We didn’t expect them to be there. And we’d have been there sooner if Arabella had followed your instructions.”

My jaw clenches. “Do *not* blame her for your fuck up.” I limp across the room, catching sight of my reflection in the window.

I stop and turn. I look a mess. One eye is still swollen shut, my lips are bruised and scabbed over. There are black and purple bruises covering my face, and chest. A bandage is covering the gunshot wound just below my right shoulder and near my armpit.

Bret appears behind me. “You were fucking lucky he didn’t kill you.”

“No thanks to you.”

“Eli—”

“You used us, Bret. You saw a way to boost your career by catching an escaped psychopath, and you used us to do it. Tell me, if one of us had died, would you have given a fuck?”

“Of course, I would.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s dead. You’re both alive.”

“At what cost?” I turn and walk past him to the door. “Why the fuck are you still here, anyway?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m okay. Now fuck off.”

“Eli—”

I spin to face him. “If you fucking *Eli* me one more time, I’ll happily go to prison for your fucking murder.”

“If you do that, you won’t get to spend the rest of your life with Arabella.”

“What room is she in?”

He doesn’t reply, so I step outside into the hallway. If he won’t tell me, I’ll just check every fucking room until I find her.

“Fuck’s sake, Eli. Fine! Just remember, she thought you were dead. She’s been out of it, not really focused on what’s going on. I’ll take you to see her, and then you need to get your stubborn ass back into bed.”

“I just need to see her.” I need to know she’s alive.

“This way.” It’s a slow walk, but we eventually stop outside a room. There’s a curtain pulled across the window, shielding the occupier from view.

“Mr. Travers! You should be in bed.” A nurse hurries over to us.

I sigh. “Not you, as well.”

“I told him he could see Arabella, and then he’ll go back to his room.”

The nurse smiles. “Five minutes. She’s just woken up and is a little tired and confused.”

My hand is shaking when I reach for the handle and push the door open. I step through and my eyes immediately lock on the figure in the bed. She looks small, fragile, and she’s crying quietly.

I let the door close behind me.

“Hey, Kitten.” My throat is tight and that’s all I can force out.

She doesn’t respond straight away. I move closer.

“Ari?”

Her head lifts from the pillow. “Eli?” Her voice is small, disbelieving. She shakes her head. “No, you’re dead.”

“I’m not dead.”

“But Miles said—”

“I haven’t seen Miles.” I cross the room and sink down on

the edge of her bed.

She doesn't make any move toward me, staring out of huge blue eyes. "It must be the medication they gave me. You're not really here. I just wish you are."

"I'm really here, Kitten."

"B-but he shot you. I saw you on the ground. There was blood ..." Tears well in her eyes. "So much blood."

"I know. They wouldn't let me come and see you sooner. The bullet hit me just below the shoulder. It went straight through. I think I hit my head, which knocked me out."

"But you're dead."

I reach out and palm her cheek. "Baby, I'm not dead."

Pain ricochets through my body when she launches herself at me, but I don't care. I'll take all the fucking pain in the world because she's here. In my arms. Where she's meant to be.

I press kisses to her hair while she sobs, clinging to me. She's saying something but I can't make it out, and at this moment in time, I don't care. I wrap my good arm around her and hold her close until her sobs grow quiet, and she pulls away, wiping her eyes.

Her fingers lift to touch my face, gently ghosting over the bruises and swelling. "Does it hurt?"

I kiss the tips of her fingers. "Not anymore."

CHAPTER 129

ARABELLA

Eli is alive.

A thousand emotions pass through me. Relief. Fear that this isn't real. Love. Concern. Worry. And hope.

He's here. Battered, bruised, but warm and real and, more importantly, with me. I'm not sure if I want to burst into tears again or laugh with joy.

"You should have told me about Evan." I opt for scolding, just to keep the tears at bay.

"And you shouldn't have followed me." He cups my jaw in a shaking hand. "You put yourself in danger. I'm not letting you do that again, you crazy little Hellcat."

"I killed Evan," My voice is small. "I ... shot him. He was —"

"You did what you had to do."

I bite my lip, fresh tears surging in my eyes. He needs to know about the babies, but I have something to tell him first. This can't wait. Not any longer.

A look of pain flickers in his eyes. "Ari—"

"I don't need to think about what I want. I fall asleep thinking about you, Eli Travers, I dream about you. I wake up missing you." The confession leaves me with a broken snuffle.

“I should have had the courage to tell you sooner. I’m so sorry I didn’t.”

His thumb brushes away a tear off my cheek. “Kitten—”

The wave of words continues to roll out of me. “Wherever you want to live, I’ll go. The cabin or the Hamptons, I don’t care where, because home is wherever *you* are. I love you so much. I never stopped loving you. I need you. I can’t live without you, Eli, no matter how crazy you make me.”

He silences me with a hard possessive kiss, one that *must* have hurt his mouth to give me.

“I love you too. You were made for me, Ari. Nothing was going to keep us apart.”

Relief soaks through me. “I’m yours. All yours.”

“You’ve been mine for fucking years. You always have been. And there is no way in hell I’m letting you walk away from me again. We’ve been through too much. Life is too short to have nothing but regrets.”

I crumble against his chest with a little sob. “G-good. B-because I d-don’t want to go anywhere without you.”

Why can’t I stop crying? Maybe it’s my mixed-up hormones.

Eli strokes my back with his good hand. I shatter in his arms a second time. He croons to me through every gasp and choked sob. Nonsense words that soothe simply because it’s his voice, his arms, his warmth wrapped around me.

It takes a few minutes before I quieten again.

“I want kids,” I tell him as I lay back against the pillow.

Eli smiles, looking as tired as I feel. “You want to have my babies, Ari?”

“Yes.” A wave of tiredness washes over me.

“There’s nothing I want more than to start a family with you, but you might have to wait a few days. I don’t think either of us are in any condition to make babies right now.”

A tap at the door interrupts us, and the nurse appears. “Time up, Mr. Travers. You both need to rest.”

Eli huffs.

I reach for his hand as he rises off the bed, and I look at the nurse. “Please, just two more minutes.”

She purses her lips but nods. “I’m watching the clock, so be quick.”

“I’m not going far. My room is down the hallway. I’m not going to leave without you. You need to rest, baby. We can make plans later.”

My eyes are heavy, and I have to fight to keep them open. “Eli.”

His thumb caresses my fingers. “Yes?”

“The future is now.”

“That’s right, Kitten. We will look to the future from now on. We’ve already wasted too much time letting the past

dictate our future.”

“No.” I take his hand and press it flat against my abdomen.
“It’s here *now*.”

Eli freezes.

My eyes close but not before I see the look of utter shock etched across his battered face.

“Ari? What?” His voice is low and raw with emotion. “Are you ... you’re pregnant?”

“Babies,” I reply, my voice slurred with drowsiness. “We’re having babies.”

There’s silence for a split second.

“Fuck. You’ve got no chance of getting away from me now,” Eli’s throaty growl is possessive. “Do you hear me, Kitten? You’re mine now. For good. Even if I have to tie you to our bed.”

A smile curves my lips, relief at his acceptance banishing any lingering doubts. I want to say more. Explain that I’ve only just found out. That it’s not something I’ve kept from him, but I can’t fight as sleep drags me under.

Eli is alive, and right now, that’s all that matters to me.

CHAPTER 130

ELI

“Mr. Travers?” The nurse’s voice intrudes on my thoughts, and I slowly pull my gaze from Arabella’s sleeping form and focus on the woman in the doorway. “You really need to get back to your own room and rest, as well.”

“Yeah.” I make no move to leave.

The nurse takes a step closer. “Mr. Travers ... Eli, right?” Her hand touches my arm. “Let’s get you back into your bed. She’s perfectly fine. She’s just sleeping. *You* need to rest more than she does. She wasn’t shot.”

“She could have been.” I mutter the words, but she hears me.

“But she *wasn’t*. Focus on what did happen instead of what could have.” She pats my hand. “Come along, I’ll walk you back.”

I let her draw me through the door and out into the hallway. “She’s having my baby.”

“I know. Babies. Two of them.”

“Two?” I thought when Arabella had said babies, it was a mistake caused by drowsiness. “She’s having *two*?”

The nurse laughs quietly. “That’s right.”

I frown and stop. “Why didn’t she tell me?” Would she have

told me if Evan hadn't shown up? Would she have gone back to L.A. and kept it from me?

"From her surprised reaction when I mentioned it to her earlier, she didn't know. She found out just before you came to her room."

The churning in my gut eases, and I follow the nurse down the hallway to my room.

"*Eli?*" The incredulous shout is the only warning I get before I'm almost bowled over by Miles.

Pain shoots down my arm and across my chest when he drags me into a hug.

"Fuck." I grit my teeth and throw my head back.

"Sir. *Sir*, please let go."

The pain eases but doesn't disappear completely as the nurse pulls him off me. I brace a hand against the wall, and suck in breath after breath as I battle through the waves of nausea.

"I thought you were dead!" He dashes at his eyes.

"Are you *crying?*" I squint at him, still breathing heavily, and he slowly comes back into focus.

"I saw them take you out of the house. You were covered in blood. I thought you were *dead!*" The sentence ends on a shout.

"Clearly, I'm not dead." I scowl at him. "Didn't Bret tell you?"

“I haven’t seen him since they brought Arabella in. I stayed in her room. I didn’t want her to wake up alone.”

My irritation softens, and I nod.

“What happened?” His eyes shift to the bandage wrapping my shoulder, and they widen. “You were shot?”

“Mr. Travers! I really must insist on you getting back into bed now,” the nurse interrupts, her voice firm.

My irritation returns, full force. “I’m fine.”

“You’re fine because you’re on pain meds. They’re going to wear off at some point and the pain you’re feeling now will be nothing to how it will feel then. Get into bed, please.” Her hand wraps around my good arm and she all but drags me into the room.

Miles trails along behind her.

“Can you do me a favor and find Bret? He’ll be lurking around somewhere. Claims he wanted to make sure we’re all okay. Personally, I think he feels fucking guilty for nearly getting us killed. Then find someone who can arrange for Ari to either move closer to me, or me closer to her. Ideally sharing a room.” I nod. “Yeah. Do that. Find someone who can put us in a room together. Throw money at them, if necessary.”

Miles slowly straightens as I fire instructions at him, and I hide a smile. Giving him something to do will take his mind off everything else.

I drop onto the mattress and let the nurse drag my jeans off.

I can't say I'm not relieved at her insistence on doing it because I'm pretty sure I'll topple over if I try. Swinging my legs up, I settle back against the pillows, while she drags the covers over me. I tip my head back and close my eyes.

“Oh, and Miles?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell Ivan thank you.”

“What are you thanking him for?”

The tone in his voice makes me open my eyes to peer at him. “Because if he hadn't insisted on us coming to Churchill Bradley, Evan might still be out there, and we wouldn't know about it. He could have kidnapped or killed Ari.”

“He was after you.”

“And eventually he would have realized that taking Ari would have given me to him. He was still stuck in the idea that I hated her. That's why he didn't take her sooner. But he'd have figured it out at some point.”

A wave of pain washes over me.

“One more thing?”

“Sure.” His voice seems far away.

“Could you organize some pain meds for me?”

“I'll get the nurse on it. Rest, Eli.”

CHAPTER 131

ARABELLA

“Slow the fuck down. You’re pushing her too fast,” Eli grumbles.

“Do it yourself, then.” I can visualize Miles rolling his eyes in my head.

“If I didn’t hurt to push her, I would.”

I laugh. “Will you two stop arguing? I’m not made of glass. I’m pregnant and not the one who got shot.” I twist to look at Eli. “You’re supposed to be in a wheelchair as well.”

“I’m fine.” Eli insists as he keeps pace beside the wheelchair as we move down the hallway. “I just want to get you home where you can rest.”

It’s been three days since I told him I was pregnant. When I woke up after finding out he was alive, I was in a different room, and Eli was lounging on the second bed. Once I was awake Eli had talked Miles into pushing them together for us, and we’d talked. *Really* talked. He held my hand, refusing to let me go, while he told me what had happened between the car crash and me storming into the farmhouse.

I still get choked up, remembering how he touched my belly with a look of awe. The pride and wonder when the nurse did the ultrasound. Our first look at the little ones growing inside me.

“If it’s boys, you need to name one of them after me,” Miles announces as he pushes me into the elevator.

“No fucking way,” Eli growls.

“They could be girls.” I point out, hoping to avoid another argument between the pair of them. “We won’t know the sex for a few more weeks.”

“Mila is the female version of Miles.”

“We are not fucking naming one of our children after you.”

I place my hand against my abdomen and smile. “Let’s get through the first trimester before we think of names. We have plenty of time for that.”

The doors slide open, and we make our way through the reception area. There are people beyond the main doors. Faces peering at us through the glass, and as we get closer, they start to shout. The commotion makes me uneasy.

“Fuck.” Eli moves in front of the wheelchair as Miles halts. “It’s the press.”

I shoot a nervous look at the doors. “What do they want?”

“There’s been a lot of coverage over what happened with Evan.” Miles touches my shoulder gently. “A bunch of people got interviewed, including Lacy, Maggie, Jace, and Garrett. I’m sure you can imagine what they’ve been saying.”

My attention shifts to Eli. “Did you know about this?”

“Ivan and Bret mentioned it to me when you were asleep

yesterday. It's one of the reasons Bret has been hanging around like a bad smell. I didn't want to worry you."

"We need to get to the car," Miles says.

Eli nods. "Let me check it's out there. Bret has agents waiting, just in case something like this happened. They should be waiting for us." He pulls out his phone with his good hand and moves away from us.

I twist in my wheelchair to peer up at the man behind me. "Are you okay?"

He shrugs. "I'm still not talking to Ivan if that's what you mean. I gave him back his ring."

"Oh, Miles."

"I'm not sure I can forgive him for what he did. Not telling us like that."

"What did he say?"

"That he understands, but he's going to fight for my forgiveness. He said he doesn't want to lose me." Miles glances away from me, but not before I see the sadness in his eyes. "I just can't be around him right now."

Eli reappears. "They're meeting us at the door. Let's go."

My stomach twists into knots of anxiety as I'm wheeled toward the exit. The doors whoosh open, and four hulking men in black suits enter. With a nod at Eli, they surround us. I burrow deeper into my hoodie ... *Eli's* hoodie ... and duck my head. A beat later, a crowd of shouting reporters are clustered

around us with microphones and cameras. I keep my gaze focused on my lap.

“Miss Gray, can you tell us about Evan Ridley?”

“Were you sexually involved with him?”

“Mr. Travers, did Ridley murder your best friends because he was jealous of you?”

“Is it true the other students called you the Monster of Churchill Bradley Academy?”

“Miss Gray, did Mr. Travers force you to perform in sexually explicit videos when you were a student at the Academy?”

“Can you tell me how you felt when you shot Evan Ridley?”

“Did you know Ridley had been in contact with former students at the school?”

“Were you one of them, Miss Gray?”

“Mr. Travers, were you the leader of a cult at Churchill Bradley Academy? One that included Zoey Rivers and Kellan Fraser?”

Eli stiffens beside me.

I reach for his hand and hold on tight. The reporters shout more questions, but they all merge into one deafening wall of sound. Our bodyguards push through them and make a path to the car. Two of them keep the paparazzi back while the others help us into the rear seat. The doors slam, muffling the chaos

outside and then it's just the driver and us.

I sag into the seat. "I hope they don't follow us."

Eli's jaw is tense. "God only knows what Maggie and that fucking bitch, Lacy, told them. I'll put out a statement when we're ready." He lifts my fingers to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "I've had electric gates installed at the house. They won't get past them, or the security guards posted there."

The car pulls away from the hospital.

"Security guards?" I repeat.

"We're not going to the cabin."

"But I thought—"

He turns to me. "I can't look after you the way I want there. Not while I'm still healing. Plus, with the babies coming ... you need to be somewhere we can get to the hospital when it's time for them to come. Twins can be born prematurely—"

"How do you know that?"

"I researched it."

I arch an eyebrow. "You've been thinking about this a lot, haven't you?"

"It's *all* I've been thinking about since you told me," he admits roughly. "We can still use the cabin for our vacations. Family time."

That sends a tingle of warmth through me. "What about your art?"

“I can have it transported to the house. I already have a studio there. We can adapt one of the other rooms for you, so you can carry on with your stained glass.”

At that moment, I love him a little bit more. I want to climb onto his lap, lose myself in his touch, but I resist. Miles wouldn't appreciate being a spectator for the things I want to do to Eli.

And as much as I want to make love to the father of my babies, I can't until he's healed.

CHAPTER 132

ELI

TWO MONTHS LATER

You're welcome.

I frown, putting the finishing touches on the bench I've positioned inside the small maze in the garden.

"For what?"

If it wasn't for me, you'd never have got the girl.

I snort.

Tell me I'm wrong.

"So fucking wrong."

Bullshit. She'd have run screaming from you if I hadn't taught you how to love her.

"Is that what you did?" I run a hand over the wood and take a step back.

One hundred percent.

"Sure. Okay."

You can deny it all you like, but deep down, you know I'm right.

"I know you're an asshole. Why are you still haunting me anyway?"

I needed to make sure you weren't going to get into trouble

again. But I think it's almost time to say goodbye.

“Eli?” Arabella’s voice cuts through my conversation with a ghost. “Are you ready to go?”

She turns the corner and stops, gaze landing on the bench. Pink coats her cheeks. I shrug.

“It seemed like the right thing to do. Our relationship started at a bench. I can’t bring old Churchill’s tomb here, but this is the next best thing.” I wave a hand to the small pergola behind the bench.

“Is this what you’ve been working on all week?” She moves to stand beside me, her fingers finding mine.

“Yeah.”

Her brow furrows, and she skirts the bench to look behind the pergola. “Is that—”

“My very first marble sculpture.” I move up behind her and drop a kiss to her shoulder.

Her hand rubs over her stomach, and she chuckles. “It’s going to be interesting hearing you explain to our children why the demon is holding their naked mom in his arms.”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

She turns and loops her arms around my neck. “Oh, you will?”

“Absolutely.”

She leans up and kisses the corner of my mouth. “I love it.”

“I love *you*.” Tightening my grip on our linked fingers, I tug her back toward the bench. “Sit down.”

I pull my cell out of my pocket while she settles onto the seat and type out a text.

Me: There's a small box beneath the bench. Open it and follow the instructions.

I hit send, then lift my gaze to hers, smiling when her phone chimes. A small frown pleats her brow as she reads, then looks around for the box. She finds it by her feet, picks it up and opens it. There's a folded piece of paper on top of a black velvet bag inside. She carefully unfolds it and reads.

I know what it says:

Open the bag.

I type out another text, but don't send it.

Her lips part, the paper dropping from her fingers as she pulls out the bag. Inside there's a ring. The stones are a mix of green and red—emeralds and rubies—clustered around a diamond.

Her eyes rise to meet mine. I hit send.

Me: Red or green?

“Green!” She throws herself at me. I catch the ring before she drops it and lower myself to my knees.

“Give me your hand.”

Her fingers are shaking when I take them in mine. “I was on a path to becoming the monster they accused me of, until you came along. I’m still a monster, I always will be, but I’m *your* monster, just as you’re my Kitten, my Princess ... my Hellcat.” I push the ring onto her finger. “I love you, Ari.”

She pulls me to my feet and winds her arms around my neck. “I love you, my Nasty Little Monster.”

There. Strangely, Kellan’s voice sounds like it comes from *outside* my head. *I think it’s time for me to go. See you in about six months, right?*

EPILOGUE

ARABELLA

“Mom, Kellan stole my phone,” my eleven-year-old daughter screeches from the top of the stairs.

I roll my eyes. “Kellan Travers, give your sister back her phone right now.”

A dark-haired boy comes racing down the steps toward me. He scowls. His sharp cheekbones and dark expression remind me of his father when I first met him. Only his eyes are different. They’re blue, sometimes turning gray. They remind me of the boy he’s named after. “Zoey is a liar. I don’t have her phone.”

“I don’t know why you two can’t just get along. You’re about to leave for school. You’re lucky to have a sister the same age attending there with you. At least you’ll know someone.”

“Probably because she’s a harpy.”

“I heard that.” Zoey bounds down the steps. Her features are softer than those of her brothers, and her hair is blonde instead of black, but she has her father’s green eyes. “At least I’m not a troll baby. They swapped you at birth. You’re not my real brother.”

“Kellan was born one minute ahead of you.” I remind her. “Your father was right there. Nobody was swapped.”

“Which makes me older than you.” Kellan’s grin is smug.

Zoey huffs. “Yeah, yeah. You’re going to hold that over me forever. Just tell me where you put my phone.”

“I don’t have it.”

“Like I’m going to believe that.”

“Enough, you two.” Eli’s voice booms. “I was trying to get Mila down for a nap, and the noise out of the pair of you isn’t letting that happen.”

I turn to find him coming toward us with our sleepy two-year-old cradled in his arms. Blonde curls frame her face, her green eyes blinking drowsily as her chubby little hand clutches the front of his t-shirt.

My heart swells at the sight of them. Our love for each other has grown with each passing year and expanded to encompass our children. It hasn’t always been easy. We’ve been through tears, heartbreak, and pain, but the happiness and joy we finally have has been worth it.

Eli’s lips curve into one of his secretive knowing smiles, and he gives me a wink. “When was the last time you had your phone, Zoey?”

She pouts. “In the maze this morning.”

“Maybe you left it in there?”

Kellan pokes her in the side. “That sounds like something you would do. If your head wasn’t attached to your body, you’d lose that too.”

“Why don’t you just shut up if you can’t say anything useful? Wait! Where are you going?”

“To find it first!” he calls as he runs down the hallway toward the door. “Then I’ll definitely hide it.”

“Kellan!” she screeches and takes off after him.

“Remember your grandmother will be here for lunch, so don’t get lost in there *again*. That includes not tying each other to a tree at the end of the garden and leaving them to the elements.” I shake my head and laugh, turning to look at my husband. “I don’t think Churchill Bradley Academy is ready for those two.”

Eli rocks Mila gently from side to side. “They’ll definitely leave their mark on the place.” There’s an odd note to his voice.

“Are you still worried about sending them?”

“No, Miles and Elena are right. The Academy wasn’t to blame for what happened to us.” He drops a kiss on top of the toddler’s head. “It doesn’t stop me from worrying though.”

I close the distance between us and wrap my arm around his waist. “They have each other, and we’ve taught them right from wrong. They know to call home if they need us.”

“I know.”

My own worries whisper in the back of my head. It took a lot of convincing for us to agree to send the twins to Churchill Bradley. The past has colored our view of the place. But my

mother is right. It's *not* the same as back then. Things are different now. Kellan and Zoey are stronger than either of us ever were.

I fall into step beside Eli and we walk into the living room. The painting above the fireplace draws my eye, the way it always has. A blonde woman lying on a bed, while a monster lurks in the shadows, watching her sleep.

"It will be quiet around here after they're gone." I pull my gaze away from the painting.

"Is that a wistful tone I hear, Mrs. Travers? I'm sure I can find a way to keep you occupied." He gently lowers our sleeping daughter onto the couch.

"Hmm, we haven't visited the pergola in the maze for a while."

"No, we haven't." He straightens and side-eyes me. "Tonight?"

I glance toward the door. "What about the kids?"

"Miles and Ivan can watch Mila for us. You know they dote on her. I'm sure your mom will take the twins. She'll want at least one crazy shopping trip with them before we ship them off to school." His gaze drops to my mouth. "We *definitely* need some alone time. It's been too long."

"In the dark."

Eli pulls me into his arms. "It's time to feed your monster, my love."

My arms wind around his neck. “You know one day they’re going to see us sneaking off.”

He smirks. “They have to catch us first.”

“I love you, my Nasty Little Monster.” I kiss him and sink my teeth into his bottom lip hard.

The familiar darkness flares to life in his eyes. The second I release him, his tongue invades my mouth.

This is where I belong. Where I’ve always been meant to be. This is my world. My fairytale come true.

I don’t need a Prince Charming to make me happy. Not when the monster of my story has always been the man for me.

“Red or green, Kitten?” he whispers against my lips.

“Green. The answer will always be green.”

Thank you for coming on Eli and Arabella’s journey with us.

If you enjoyed Churchill Bradley Academy, we’d love it if you could leave a review on your preferred site.

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L. Ann and Claire Marta want to thank you for taking a chance on their very first delve into bully romance, and hope you'll join them on another adventure very soon!