

A dramatic poster for 'Dark Creed'. The background is a dark, textured brick wall. In the center, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, is shown in profile, looking down at a woman. He has his hands on her face, holding her gently. The woman has long dark hair and is looking up at him. The lighting is low and moody, highlighting their profiles. The title 'DARK CREED' is written in large, bold, yellow, stylized letters on the left side. At the bottom, the name 'CM WONDRAK' is written in the same yellow, stylized font.

# DARK CREED

CM WONDRAK

Dark Creed

CM Wondrak

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Book cover by Quirah Casey at Temptation Creations

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## Chapter One – Taylor

The night I left my dad's house, I had no idea what I would do, the turns life would take. I was nineteen, a full-time college student with no job of her own, so it wasn't like I could make it out in the world by myself—but I guess that's the issue. Dad knew I couldn't, and he wanted me to hurt like I'd made him hurt, so when he told me I wasn't welcome back, he knew he had me.

It wasn't like we had much, not after my stepmom died. She'd been the cash cow to him. Maybe he'd loved her; I didn't know, but it didn't matter anymore. It'd been ten years since then, and so much had changed.

So much, and yet nothing at all.

Dad had probably hoped I'd graduate and land a fantastically-paying job, and instead of me leeching off him, as he often put it, *he'd* be the one to leech off *me* for the rest of my life. I didn't know it when I was a kid, but that's what my dad was: a parasite, someone who dug their claws into anyone they could and only let go when they drained them dry.

Or they were ripped from his grasp before their time, like my stepmom. And my mom, I guess. Didn't remember her at all; she'd died when I was a baby.

So, when I stumbled from the house, wearing sweatpants and a baggy hoodie—what I always wore when I tried to attract no attention—I had no idea what I'd do or where I'd go. I'd managed to slip on a ratty pair of tennis shoes before stumbling out and down the front steps. I think I made it halfway down the driveway when I heard the door slam shut. I didn't need to go back and check; it was locked.

I kept my hands in my hoodie pocket, turning my back to the house, to my dad, who surely watched through the window to see what I'd do, where I would go. When I made it to the sidewalk, I attempted to slow my breathing; my heart beat so

wildly in my chest that it felt like it was seconds from either exploding or popping out of my lungs and ribs and running away on its own. A tight, unrelenting pressure filled my chest cavity. This kind of stress wasn't good for you.

Dad wanted me to turn around. He wanted me to beg for his forgiveness for what I'd done, but after so many years of this... I'd taken all I could. I didn't want to go back. Even though I had nothing to my name, I just couldn't go back.

And because I couldn't go back, I turned and started walking.

Where was I going? I didn't know. Nowhere in particular was my answer; anywhere to get away from that house and the man inside it.

A few minutes later, it started to rain. Just my terrible luck.

I couldn't remember if my dad had always been like this. A part of me didn't remember much from my childhood, maybe because I'd blocked so much of it out. Only a few select memories remained in my head from when my stepmom was alive and we were one big, happy family. Maybe her death made him spiral, made him more controlling and cruel.

Or maybe it was me.

I didn't think I'd been a bad kid, though. I wasn't someone who partied it up, drank every weekend to the point where I passed out, and hooked up with any cute guy in my vicinity. I was just your average college student, commuting to class, still living at home to save some money. There was nothing remarkable about me. I skated under everyone's radar.

It wasn't like I'd ever gone against Dad's rules. I never threw tantrums... not until tonight, but a part of me didn't want to describe tonight as a tantrum of mine.

As if reminding me, the skin on my throat burned, and I tried not to pay any attention to it as I walked along. My right hand fiddled with my phone in my hoodie pocket; I bet Dad thought I was going to a friend's house, or maybe back to campus where I could crash on one of the couches in the

student union. I bet he thought I'd come back tomorrow—or this weekend, at the latest.

I had a small circle of friends, other college students I'd met and clicked with freshman year. I wasn't popular by any means. I'd only known them for a short time, though. None of my current friends had grown up with me or gone to high school or elementary with me. I didn't want to call them or go to their place. If I did, then I'd have to explain what happened... and I just couldn't do that.

That was the problem: I had nobody. When the shit hit the fan, I had nobody. I'd been used to it for so long, but it wasn't always like that. Years ago, when my stepmom was still alive, there was someone else. I didn't often think about it anymore, because it felt like a fool's dream.

I quickened my pace, walking a familiar path. The local community college was downtown, in a few buildings scattered amongst the city blocks. The campus was about the only place downtown with some green areas, trees and grass. Like a little park. That's where I went, and once I got there, I found myself a bench and sat.

My heart had stopped constricting in my chest, the near heart-attack sensation in my body gone. My breathing was under control, but my thoughts certainly weren't. I brought out my right hand and checked the time to see how long it had taken me to walk here.

An hour.

A whole damn hour. The adrenaline had pumped so hard in my veins from that whole encounter with my dad that I hadn't noticed. I leaned back on the bench, turning my gaze to the sky above. Not quite nighttime yet, but dusk had arrived. Soon enough it'd get dark, the world would be swallowed by blackness, and sitting on a bench outside was the last place you'd want to be, even if that bench was on campus.

I guess it was true: you were never truly safe anywhere. The people around you hid secrets you didn't know, and the people you thought you knew could snap and change in a matter of seconds. Speaking of...

I was slow to pull out my other hand from my hoodie pocket, turning my head down to look at it. No one was around, so no one else saw the state of my hand. Bloody cuts lined my palm and my fingers... a lot of the skin was wet with red, a particularly deep cut at the base of my palm.

The sound of shattering glass filled my ears, but I shook the memory away. Let's just say there was no way my dad would let me forget that, even if I came crawling back to him and begged for his forgiveness, like he so desperately wanted.

I didn't want to. I'd been miserable these last ten years. Enough was enough, wasn't it? How much could one person take? How much could they take before they snapped and were totally unrecognizable?

Tonight, I think I reached that limit, because as I flicked my eyes over to my injury-free hand, I knew I had to do something else, something I'd only ever dreamed of doing.

When pushed to the limit, people either broke or rose above it and showed how strong they were. Me? As much as I'd like to think I was the latter, I knew I wasn't. Someone else was, though—or, at least, I believed he was.

It'd been ten years. Ten whole years. The number I had memorized might not even be the same. And, if it was still a good number, he was under no obligation to help me. Why should he? Why *would* he? If he had any goodness in his heart, he would've at least visited to make sure I was okay.

But he hadn't. He'd packed up everything, leaving not a thing for me to remember him by besides the memories. He'd left, and I remembered standing on the front porch, watching him go, begging him to stay. It was right after the funeral, and he didn't seem to care that I was hurting, too.

Honestly, there were a million and one reasons why I shouldn't call him. Another million and one reasons why he might not be the one to answer the call. So many possibilities, and yet I had to try.

I had no one else. No one else besides a few people that probably wouldn't be in my life after college graduation. And,



frankly, the last thing I wanted to do was return to that house, even if all of the stuff I needed for my classes was in my room.

So, even though I might come to regret it, I unlocked my phone screen and went to the keypad, manually putting in the number I'd memorized when I was a child. Once the number was fully typed in, I hit the call button, slow to bring the phone to my ear.

It rang, meaning the number wasn't disconnected. That was a good sign, right? It could mean someone else might answer, but at least the number was still good. I'd never written the number down, because he'd told me not to. Dad would've found it, and he would've used it to track him down and demand his share of the money.

When my stepmom died, she'd left everything to him, not to Dad, and that had infuriated him to no end. Maybe that was when he'd changed, when he'd become more hateful towards me. Like I was the failure instead of him, someone else he could blame for his misfortune.

I didn't know how many times it rang, but it felt like more times than it should've, like it was a landline with no answering machine attached and it took no messages. The more it rang, the more I felt sick. Nervous, I guess.

Desperation drove people to do crazy things, and this... this was perhaps the craziest thing I'd ever done. Well, besides cutting up my hand like that.

An eternity passed, and as my hope began to dwindle, someone finally picked up the phone and answered it: "Black Wolf speaking. Who is this?" The voice was low and masculine, the words perfectly enunciated.

*Black Wolf.* At the mention of the words, my mind flashed back.

*I was running up the steps, eager to show my stepmom something. I made it to my parents' bedroom, and the door was cracked. I thought it was okay to run in, so I did. I didn't think I'd catch her changing into her pajamas.*

*I should've covered my eyes, but I couldn't, because when I ran in I saw her back, and what I saw on her back was a giant tattoo of a wolf. Not photo-realistic, but simplistic in its design. Tribal and all black.*

*"You have a tattoo?" I squealed, forgetting what I'd come in there for.*

*She turned toward me, tugging her loose silk shirt down over her head and covering up that cool tattoo. She gave me a gentle smile as she nodded. "I do," she said. "But you have to keep it a secret." Then she lifted a finger to her mouth and winked at me.*

*"Does daddy know?" I asked.*

*"He does, and so does your brother." She knelt in front of me, sinking down to my level. She tugged at my clothes, fixing the wrinkles in my shirt. "And now you do. Maybe if you help me keep it a secret from everyone else, I'll let you get a tattoo when you're older."*

I was seven at the time. That memory was clear in my head, even now. I remembered being so excited to see that big tattoo on her back. I'd known she was my stepmom before that, but that was the day that I started calling her mom.

And then she died, and everything fell apart, and he left, so I'd started calling her my stepmom once again. It was funny how quickly everything could change.

I didn't say anything right away, my heart constricting in my chest for a whole new reason. The man on the line didn't hang up, he simply waited for me to speak. What words could I say? That voice might be deeper than I remembered it, but it was him.

It was him.

It had to be him.

"It's me," I whispered, a lump in my throat I couldn't deny. I hid my bloodied hand back in my hoodie pocket, as if he was before me and not on the other line, as if he could see my injury and I didn't want him to.

Those two words were the only ones I could say, which was stupid. It'd been ten years; I didn't know if he'd remember me. Maybe all of the memories in my head of him, of us together, had been painted with rose-colored glasses because I'd been a child.

And, besides, how would he know it was me, after all this time? How would he know it was me and not some other random girl?

But, like he could see me, like he was psychic, he knew: "Taylor."

The way he said my name was like a rush of adrenaline had been pumped straight into my heart, and all of the air flowed out of my lungs in one whoosh. I didn't remember my name sounding like that on his tongue; so low, so gravelly, so husky.

It took everything in me to only say, "I need you." Not spilling my guts to him was the hardest thing ever, mostly because I wanted to tell him everything. Absolutely everything. What I'd been up to these last ten years, how awful things with my dad had gotten, how many nights I'd spent missing him and wishing he didn't leave me.

The fear that he would turn me away was smashed when he rattled off an address and asked, "Can you meet me there, or do you need me to come get you?" Willing to go out of his way for me, even after all this time. It made me smile.

"Can you say it again?" I brought the phone away from my ear, hitting the speaker and typing the address in as he repeated it. It wasn't too far from where I was; further downtown. A fifteen-minute walk from here. "I can meet you there," I said, once again bringing the phone to my ear.

"All right. I'll see you soon."

"Goodbye," I whispered out the word before hanging up, my heart fuller than it had been in a long time. He was coming to meet me. Ten years might've passed, he might sound gruffer, older, but he was still the same guy I used to know.

I didn't sit there and linger longer than I had to. I got up and started walking.

There were a lot of places downtown I'd never been, mostly because I had no reason to go deep into the city, where some of the buildings were so tall they reached toward the sky. The streets were busy, traffic jams more common than not. As I walked, I figured it'd be faster to use your own feet than drive a car here.

I followed my phone's directions, reaching the place in twelve minutes, not fifteen... mostly because I'd jogged there. The anticipation was thick in my veins, I couldn't help it.

The Hooting Owl sat on a street corner on the base level of one of the smaller buildings downtown. Its sign was made of old wood, an owl's wing outstretched, where the words were carved. I gathered myself, not knowing what to expect when I walked in. I think it was a restaurant or something.

I was seconds from pushing inside when a man and a woman walked out, arm in arm. When they saw me, their eyes widened. The man didn't say a word, but the woman did: "Are you lost, sweetheart?"

"No," I told her. "I'm supposed to meet someone here."

Her eyes scanned me up and down. I could tell she was unimpressed by what she saw, and I couldn't blame her. She was gorgeous, wearing a short leather dress and I... I was in sweats and a hoodie, college necessities. "If you're sure, darling," she was slow in saying, and without another word, she and the man left.

I looked down at myself, seeing my homeless appearance for myself. With a sigh and a shrug, I pushed inside, because there was nothing else I could do. I had no clothes to change into. I... I had nothing, right now.

The Hooting Owl was actually a bar. A bar with a big pool table, along with an old-fashioned jukebox and a rounded bar countertop that spanned the length of the right side of the place. A wall of mirrored glass sat behind it, the reflections of all the special booze sitting on the glass shelves made to look

double. Barstools lined that area, while the left side of the bar had a few wooden booths.

I went towards one of the booths, sliding in so I could see him when he arrived.

The bartender looked to be a man in his thirties, with slicked-back brown hair and a short goatee. He strolled over to my booth, a tall glass of something brown in his hand. He set it down near me, but I tried to push it away.

“I’m not twenty-one,” I said.

He didn’t seem surprised. “It’s coke and grenadine.” When I only stared up at him, he added, “It’s like cherry coke, no alcohol.”

I didn’t know what to say. “I don’t have any money” was what I settled on.

The man gave me a grin and said, “Don’t worry about it. It’s on the house.” He said nothing more, turning his back to me and returning to the bar, where a few patrons sat, chatting. Someone else had gone over to the jukebox and was picking out a song.

I didn’t touch the drink, mostly because I didn’t know if I could trust the bartender. I mean, I’d never heard of a bartender saying any drink was on the house. And I wasn’t sure what grenadine was.

The drink did look good. Now that it was in front of me, it looked a more reddish hue than brown. And cherry-flavored drinks were my favorite... but no. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. I couldn’t get over how strange it was that he’d given it to me in the first place.

Come on. It was girl 101 that you didn’t accept drinks from strangers, especially drinks you didn’t see made. He could’ve slipped anything into it. The last thing I needed to do tonight, after everything, was wind up murdered. No, thanks.

I didn’t know how much time passed before the door to the bar opened and a man stepped inside. He wore a sleek black suit, so out of place in a bar like this. His head surveyed the bar, landing on me.

I was seconds from deciding he wasn't who I was waiting for, because he always hated dress clothes—his mom always had the worst time getting him ready for special occasions, even her and Dad's wedding, from what I remembered—but when our gazes met from across the bar, something inside of me twisted.

It was him. It had to be him.

After that, it was like I had him on a fishing line and reeled him in, right to me. He made a beeline to my booth, walking through the place like he owned it. Wearing a fancy suit like that, he just might. He held his head high, proud, and every single soul in the place, the bartender included, watched him.

He sat across from me after unbuttoning the two buttons on his suit jacket, folding his arms over the edge of the table, not once taking that brown-eyed stare off me. His brown hair was cut short on the sides, left a little longer on top. Thick stubble lined his square jaw, his mouth drawn into a thin line.

It'd been ten whole years, but it was him. It was him. I could tell by the way he looked at me. When I was a kid, I always made fun of his serious face, but now... now that serious, intense expression made me a little uncomfortable—not because I was scared of him, but because...

Well, because it'd been a long time, and he'd obviously changed. A lot happened in ten years; I knew that much myself.

His dark gaze dropped to the drink in front of me, but it was back on me in seconds when he asked, "Don't like cherry pop anymore?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but then something occurred to me. "Did you—"

"I called Jeff and told him to make something for you," he said. "I assumed your taste buds were the same, but if you want something different, I can—"

"No," I cut in, pulling the drink closer to me. "No, I still do. I didn't know it was because of you. I thought... well, I just didn't know."

“Jeff’s a good guy. You can trust him. I do.” He folded his hands on the table, watching me take my first sip of the drink. I was too focused on how sweet the added cherry flavor was to fully comprehend that his hands looked bigger than I remembered. “What happened, Taylor? Why did you call me after all this time?”

My injury-free hand toyed with the straw in the drink, while my bloodied one still sat in my hoodie pocket. I couldn’t look at him for extended periods of time, mostly because whatever familiarity there’d been between us when we were younger was gone now.

He was a stranger now, not a boy, but a man, and a man I didn’t know anymore. Handsome, intense, and well put together. He made me uncomfortable because I didn’t know what he was thinking when he looked at me, if I was just a reminder of his mom and everything he’d lost.

“I…” I started, pausing. Some older song played from the jukebox, filling the bar with music. I didn’t know what song it was, too old for my tastes. “I need help.” I shifted my weight, crossing my legs under the table and, in the process, brushing my foot against his leg.

Man, his legs were long. They took up damn near the entire underside area.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” he said, scrutinizing me in such an intense way, I had to look away. It was like he could peer into my very soul and see all of my mistakes, all of my fears, everything I wanted to hide from him and the world. “What help do you need? What happened to make you call me after all this time?”

“I got into it with my dad,” I told him, pain throbbing on my hidden hand, proof of that. “I need a place to stay. I can’t—I can’t go back to him. He, uh…” My eyes fell to his hands. “He kicked me out.”

He was silent for a while, not saying a word as he studied me, as if trying to see if I was lying or something. Maybe he

didn't trust me. It had been ten years, after all. Trust was something that was so hard won and yet so easily lost.

Ironic if that was the case, though, because I wasn't the one who left.

Maybe it was because he wasn't saying anything, but I felt like I needed to explain further, so I said, "I don't have anywhere else to go. I have friends, but they'd ask questions, and I... they don't know how it is with my dad. You do. You remember, right? He got worse after you left." My voice dropped to a whisper, "He got so angry."

The hand fiddling with the straw dropped to the table, and I absentmindedly picked at the wood. I certainly wasn't expecting him to reach for it, for one of his big, strong hands to grab mine and squeeze. The action made me freeze up.

"Are you all right, Taylor?" Again, he said my name in a way I'd never heard it before, and I fought the urge to yank my hand away from his. Having him holding it, feeling his heat flowing into me...

We weren't strangers. We couldn't be. There was a familiarity between us neither of us could deny, even if it had been ten years. And yet, him holding onto me like that made me warm in places other than my hand.

"I'm okay." My voice came out small and quiet, unsure—mostly because I wasn't sure if I was okay. Ignoring what happened with my dad, sitting here, feeling his hand encompass mine and squeeze my fingers together like that... how could I be okay when the person I'd missed most of all had answered my out-of-the-blue call and was now acting like he cared?

He didn't care. He couldn't. Why would he have left ten years ago if he cared about me?

"If you say so," he said, slow to pull his hand off mine, letting me breathe in deeply now that I was free of his warmth. As I took another sip of the drink, a big sip, he went on, "You can stay with me. I have a decent place downtown. You can stay as long as you need to."



I couldn't help it; I grinned at him. "Thank you so much."

His dark eyes fell to my lips. "I have missed that smile. I've missed a lot, but we'll have time to catch up once we're out of here. Finish your drink. Do you want food? Have you eaten dinner?"

"I'm okay. The drink is fine." I didn't think I could eat, even if I tried to. Not tonight, not after everything that happened. The turn this day took; who would've known I'd end up here, with the one person I missed above all others. People came and went from your life all the time, but there were only a select few that made a lasting impact. He was one of mine, if not the only one.

As I sipped the drink, I found him watching me, hardy blinking. It seemed his intensity had only gotten worse—or better, depending on how you looked at it—with age. He stared at me like I was a mess of puzzle pieces, and he was trying to put them together as quickly as he could.

"You know, it's funny," I said.

"What is?"

"I memorized the number you gave me before you left. So many times I put it in my phone, but I stopped myself right before I dialed. I never let myself call, and I always stopped myself from saying your name." I bit my bottom lip. "In a weird way, I think I was saving it, your number and your name, so that when I really needed you, I'd use it and you'd come to save me." I let out a chuckle, but it was a humor-free sound. "Pretty sad, huh?"

"It's not sad. I'm here now. You don't have to be afraid of saying my name." He paused, letting his words sink in. "You know I'd always come running when you call."

I wanted to ask him why he'd left so quickly, why he never visited. Why didn't he come back for me? But it was useless to dredge up the past; had to focus on the here and now, the person in front of me.

"Creed," I spoke his name for the first time in years. "I missed you." A simple sentence, and yet that sentence carried

a certain weight behind it only he and I knew. Creed, my brother, the boy I'd risen high on a make-believe altar to worship when I was younger.

Now that I was older, though, I was painfully aware that he was no boy anymore, and he wasn't my brother. He was my stepbrother, and now... now he was like a stranger, someone who answered my call but a stranger nonetheless.

But, I guess that was a lie too, because you didn't trust strangers. You didn't know strangers, couldn't pick them out of a lineup. You didn't know who you could trust your life to, but Creed? I trusted him more than I trusted anyone else, including myself.

Creed's mouth was slow to smile, though it was more of a smirk than a grin. He didn't say anything in response to me speaking his name and telling him that I missed him, but that was fine. I didn't need to hear him say it. He'd answered my call and come to me, and that was honestly all I'd needed.

Well, that and a place to stay, because I meant it when I said I wasn't going home to Dad. No, tonight, I was going home with Creed.

## Chapter Two – Creed

*“Say the number for me out loud,” I told her. She sat on the swing in the backyard, and I stood beside her. This wasn’t the first time I’d told her the number, and it wouldn’t be the last. I’d tell her however many times it took for her to get it right, for it to sink into that brain and be locked in.*

*Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her green eyes bright, which she then rolled at me, but she giggled all the same. She repeated the number I told her, the Black Wolf’s number. Before my mom’s death, it’d been her line, and now it was mine. My days in this house were numbered, but until the money and everything else transferred into my name and my accounts, I had to wait.*

*And then, once it happened and I was officially the new Black Wolf, it was better for everyone if I left. Better for Taylor, definitely. The last thing I wanted to do was drag her into the Calypso family business.*

*My mom had never told her second husband what she did for a living. The fewer people who knew about your involvement in the Guild, the better. Still, that hadn’t stopped it from happening. Sometimes, when you were in the business of life and death, mistakes were made and death caught up to you. Such as it had been the case for my mom.*

*Taylor recited the number, though she got the last four mixed up—which I instantly corrected her on.*

*It wasn’t like I wanted to leave. It wasn’t like I’d woken up one day and decided to leave this life behind. In reality, it had been set in stone years ago, when my mom had decided to never have more children. Being in the Guild, certain positions were handed down. I’d been taught, practically since birth, that a normal life would never be for me.*

*Taylor recited the number again, this time doing it correctly, and I gave her a smile.*

*A normal life. Sometimes that was all I wanted. Sometimes I caught myself daydreaming what a normal life would be like: going to college, graduating, getting a normal job in the city. No matter what pretend life I imagined for myself, I always knew Taylor would be there, my little shadow, just like she'd been since our parents had gotten married.*

*But, like I'd said before, it was better for her if I left, and that knowledge made my heart ache a certain way, made dark, regretful feelings rise up inside of me. It fucking sucked.*

These last ten years had both passed in the blink of an eye and felt like an eternity as they went by. A part of me had wanted her to call, but the other part of me knew I couldn't do anything for her. Being there for her, even in spirit, was about all I could do when she was young.

Sitting there, across from me, she was still young now, but she wasn't underage. She'd grown so much. No longer was she the child I'd left, but instead a young woman—a beautiful young woman who acted so unsure around me, so shy, timid, like I was a stranger to her.

In a way, I supposed I was. I was not the kid I'd been when I'd left that house ten years ago. I was twenty-nine years old now, a respected member of the Guild, the Black Wolf. I didn't take every job that was offered; the Lioness knew better than to offer me the regular, run-of-the-mill jobs now. I didn't care if it hurt my standing with the Guild; if you lived by no creed, you died by no creed... and I wouldn't die without one.

When my phone had rang and I'd heard a soft voice say, "It's me," I'd known it instantly. Even though it had been ten years since we'd spoken, I'd known.

And now we were here, in the Hooting Owl, sitting across from each other. Not many souls graced the bar right now; it'd get busier as the hours of the night crept along. Many Guild members liked to spend their free time here, along with spending their hard-earned money here. It was a safe place for us, and we made sure it was a safe place for Jeff and the other workers.

“You know, it’s funny,” Taylor said. She shifted around her weight in the wooden booth, fiddling with her drink. Cherry-flavored pop was still her favorite; it was good to know some things hadn’t changed, even though we both had.

Honestly, even though she wore a baggy hoodie and looked like she needed a shower, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I asked, “What is?”

“I memorized the number you gave me before you left. So many times I put it in my phone, but I stopped myself right before I dialed. I never let myself call, and I always stopped myself from saying your name.”

She bit her bottom lip then, and I let my eyes fall to her mouth. That mouth was yet another thing that had changed these past ten years. She was my kid sister, and yet she was a woman now. It was undeniable.

“In a weird way,” Taylor continued, “I think I was saving it, your number and your name, so that when I really needed you, I’d use it and you’d come to save me.” She chuckled softly, almost a bitter sound. “Pretty sad, huh?”

It was like she wanted me to agree that it was sad, but I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. “It’s not sad. I’m here now. You don’t have to be afraid of saying my name.” There were so many things I could’ve said, so many things I wanted to say, but I managed to hold back. “You know I’d always come running when you call.”

The way she looked at me then, with those big, bright green eyes, made something in me twist. They were the same eyes she’d had when she was a kid, but now... set in a more mature face, I knew those eyes could get me to bend over backward for her.

“Creed,” she whispered my name ever so gently, so softly, like it was a prayer on her tongue. “I missed you.”

I found I liked the way she said my name. I liked it a lot. I’d never heard someone whisper my name out quite like that before. It was definitely one for the books.

I couldn't help it; I grinned. I wanted to tell her that I'd missed her too, that I'd thought a lot about the sister I'd abandoned, but I didn't. I couldn't. Maybe it was the guilt I harbored over it, the feeling of not being good enough to truly take care of her.

And here she was, coming to me, asking for help, for a place to stay. I'd told her she had a place with me as long as she needed one, and I meant it. Now that I'd made a name for myself in the Guild, I had a place downtown. As safe as a place could be, with guards stationed at the doors and bullet-proof glass for windows. Tight security. A lot of Guild members lived in the same high-rise.

The truth was, I wasn't very good at talking about feelings and shit. Doing what I did for a living meant being closed-off to most of the world. It meant going through every day, knowing I was different than most people, knowing I was alone. A part of me had always hated that.

I would keep her safe. I made that vow to myself right then, as I smiled at her. I would. I would do anything, *anything* for this girl, and I'd do it with no hesitation whatsoever. There weren't many people I'd give my life for, but Taylor... she was one of them. In fact, she was at the top of the list.

One of her hands must've sat in her lap or in her hoodie pocket, while her other lay on the table near her drink. I'd already reached over and touched her—a mistake, by all accounts, since I now knew how soft her hand was and couldn't ignore it.

*I bet every inch of her was just as soft.*

The smile fell off my face, and I looked to the side, toward Jeff behind the bar. He wasn't even pretending to work; he was leaning his forearms on the countertop, a rag thrown over his shoulder, eyes on us. When he saw me looking at him, he made a *what's going on* gesture, but I dutifully ignored him, slow to turn my attention back to Taylor.

Jeff had asked what was going on when I'd called, but I hadn't told him the details. No one deserved the details. I

might trust some people in a work capacity, but I owed them nothing when it came to my personal life.

And Taylor was about as personal as it got.

She was my sister. I shouldn't have any thoughts about her like that. So what if it'd been ten years? So what if she was now a young woman? She'd grown up having me around—and then I'd left. I knew I'd hurt her by leaving, because I'd also hurt myself.

“Are you sure you don't want any food?” I asked. She looked pretty skinny, like she didn't eat enough. That hoodie damn near swallowed her up.

“No, I'm not hungry.” Taylor sat back, moving the hand off the table and grabbing the fabric around her neck, pulling it up over her mouth. I thought I saw shadows of something, but it could be the light in this place. If I said it was well-lit in here, I'd be a liar—and I was no liar. Her drink was almost finished; it didn't look like she had any bags with her.

“Well, if you're done, we can get out of here.” I scooted out of the booth and stood up, stepping toward her side and offering her my hand. I guess a part of me wanted to feel that soft skin on mine again, even if it was a mistake wanting it.

The hand holding onto the hoodie neckline dropped, and she took my hand with no hesitation, letting me help her out of the booth. When she got to her feet, I realized she was short. She reached my chest, had to angle her head back to look up at me.

And she did just that, giving me a smile. And then she did something I wasn't expecting: she leaned into me and whispered, “I really did miss you, Creed.” The hand I was holding onto slipped from mine... but she used that same arm to wrap around my side, holding her to me in a half-hug.

I stood there for a moment, unable to do much else other than blink. My breath came out a little shakier than I wanted it to, and I struggled to wrap my arms around her short frame and hold her in return.

Taylor fit so well against me, like her body was made to be molded into mine. A missing puzzle piece. It was easy to hold her, easier to forget where we were. I closed my eyes, and together, we stood like that for a while, neither one of us wanting to be the one to pull away first.

As much as I didn't want it to end, I opened my eyes and dropped my arms, stepping away from her as I said, "Go wait near the door. I've got to pay for your drink." It was almost tough for me to get out the words, especially as I stared down into those big green eyes.

Oh, fuck. This wasn't going to be easy, was it?

"Okay," she said, stepping away from me and going to do as I said, waiting for me near the door. Once she reached the door, she turned around and looked at me from across the bar, and the look she gave me made me feel something I definitely shouldn't.

*She's your sister*, I told myself as I turned to walk toward the bar, to Jeff, *get it together, man*.

As I scolded myself, another part of me chimed in: *your stepsister*.

Jeff was smiling a sly smile when I made it to him, and he turned his head to look at Taylor near the door. "Didn't peg her for you," he said, flashing me a set of pearly whites. He rubbed a hand over his goatee, as if he thought he was some wise man. "Who is she? Not that you have to tell me, but I'm curious, because I thought you told me that you—"

I knew exactly where he was going with that, so I cut him off as I pulled out my wallet and slapped down a ten on the counter, "She's my sister, all right? So shut up."

"Oh, your sister, eh?" Jeff looked toward Taylor, giving her a smile and a wave. "She's cute. I didn't know your mom had another kid."

"She didn't."

"Your dad, then?"



The look I gave him right then could've killed. I kind of wish it would've, because if he was dead, he wouldn't have said this next part.

“Ah, she's from her second marriage, then? Your stepsister?” Jeff whistled, putting it all together. “Why do I have the feeling that Mr. Cold and Cruel is in for the ringer?” He lifted his eyebrows at me, as if expecting an answer.

I only glared at him. I also frowned, because he couldn't be further off.

“What?” Jeff's voice dropped to a whisper. He leaned forward on the bar countertop, as if he had a juicy secret to spill. Being the main bartender here, he did hear a lot of gossip. This, though, wasn't any of his business, and if I had to beat that into his skull, I most certainly would. “Stepsisters ain't off-limits. Go get her, tiger.”

“You're dead,” I whispered back, pushing away from the counter.

Jeff laughed, not taking me seriously, even though he totally should. I wasn't one to make idle threats, but... I guess I wouldn't kill him. As annoying as he could be, he wasn't a bad guy. “See you later, man. And good luck!”

That last part he called out to me louder, and as I walked away, I tossed a glare over my shoulder at him. The fool was still smiling in my direction.

When I reached Taylor, she asked, “Good luck with what?”

I pushed out of the bar, leading her out. I held open the door for her as I muttered, “It's nothing.” The last thing I wanted to do was explain to her that, according to Jeff, stepsisters were fuckable.

No. That was a line we definitely couldn't cross.

## Chapter Three – Taylor

His car was nice. Clean and new, all sleek and black, just like the suit he wore. He helped me inside, and all the while I had to make sure I never took out my bloodied hand and keep my hoodie neckline up to cover any possible bruises.

Oh, there'd definitely be bruising, but I was hoping to hide it from him.

“Nice car,” I remarked. I didn't even know what kind it was. It probably cost more than an entire year's salary for some people. “What do you do?” I didn't know if Creed could afford this because he inherited everything from his mother or if he managed to get some fancy job downtown.

He got us on the road, looking quite at ease behind the wheel of this expensive vehicle. And, as much as I probably shouldn't say it, he looked good, too. I could imagine him driving this, wearing a suit much like that, on a business trip, with pitch-black sunglasses on his face.

“Security,” he said after a while.

“Must be a lucrative business,” I muttered, turning my head to gaze out the window, watching as the city blocks passed by. I caught myself wondering what Dad was doing, but the moment I realized it, I pushed all thoughts of him from my mind. I was mad at him, for real this time. There were some things I could forget, some things I could forgive, but the way things had escalated tonight...

There was no going back, no undoing it. Things could never go back to the way they were before. I couldn't forget, and I definitely couldn't forgive him this time.

“Where do you live?” I asked, slow to turn away from the window and watch Creed instead. Looking at him, at least my thoughts weren't on my dad. No, they were on my stepbrother instead, on the man that he'd become.

“In a nice high-rise downtown,” Creed said, flicking his dark eyes over to me. “You’ll be safe there, and you can stay however long you need to.”

All this time, he’d been so close. And here I’d thought he’d left the freaking state after his mom died. All these years Creed had been so close by, and yet he’d not once come to visit? It made me sad. It made me angry. It made me so many things.

“You don’t have any bags,” he pointed out, bringing me out of my thoughts. “Why?”

“Oh, I, uh...” I let my eyes fall to my lap. “I didn’t grab anything when I left the house.”

“Do you want to go back to get anything?”

“No!” I said the word a little too quickly, because Creed shot me a questioning look immediately after. Softer this time, I said, “No. I don’t want to go back and see Dad right now. I need some space from him.”

We were at a red light, which let Creed turn his head to me and lean over the center console. He studied me intently, intensely. “Did something happen between you two? Did he do something to you?” When I didn’t say anything, when I couldn’t even look at him, he let out a sound I could only describe as a growl.

Yeah, a *growl*. What was even weirder was the fact that it sounded completely natural coming from him.

“Taylor,” he said, but he had to look forward because the light had changed. “You can tell me if he did something. If he hurt you—”

“I’m fine,” I said, though I could tell my heart wasn’t in it.

Creed made a sharp right turn. It was like he was driving more erratic now that he had the suspicion Dad had done something to me. I mean, he wasn’t wrong, but let’s not get into an accident because of it. “What did he do? You said before he got angry when I left. Did he hit you? Did he—”

“I said I’m fine,” I repeated, more firmly this time. “I don’t want to talk about it, Creed.” I glimpsed at him, watching him grind his teeth. He held onto the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles had turned white. “I just don’t want to go back there. Not now.”

He didn’t say anything to that, but I could tell he was trying to calm himself down. Even out his breathing, no more growls, and his hands weren’t so tight on the wheel. He turned us into a parking garage, in the lower levels of a high rise—which I took to mean was where he lived... where I’d be living for a while. He input a code to lift the bar to allow us inside.

I didn’t know what living with Creed was going to be like. He might be my stepbrother, but we hadn’t seen each other in so long. Sure, there was familiarity between us, as there was between family members who hadn’t seen each other in a while, but living with him was going to be different.

I mean, *look* at him. He wasn’t the teenage boy I remembered. He really wasn’t a boy at all anymore, and now that I was older, I was keenly aware of that fact. Was it wrong to think he was hot?

Yes. Yes, it was definitely wrong.

Creed parked the car and turned it off. He’d never put on his seatbelt, so he didn’t have to unbuckle before he turned his top half toward me. His eyes were even darker with the lack of light—the parking garage wasn’t the most-lit place around, even dimmer than the inside of that bar.

And those eyes of his... I swore, they saw right through me.

“We will run out tomorrow and get you anything you need,” he said. “But I need you to tell me what happened, Taylor. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me—”

I unbuckled my seatbelt with my injury-free hand, getting a little annoyed at him. Why the hell wouldn’t he drop it? “I said I don’t want to talk about it, okay? I don’t. Can we just drop it and go inside, please?” I pursed my lips into a pout

when I met that dark stare again, seconds from getting out of the car and slamming the door to prove my point.

Creed definitely noticed the pout. He said not another word, getting out of the car, and I did the same. He walked around the front of the vehicle to reach my side, and together we headed toward what must be the elevator up into the building. I noticed security cameras everywhere as we walked.

I wouldn't say it was an uncomfortable silence, but I knew he wasn't happy that I didn't want to tell him what happened between Dad and me. I mean, just because I was asking for his help didn't mean I had to tell him if I didn't want to, did it? I didn't owe him that. If I wanted to keep it a secret, I should be able to.

He hit the button to call the elevator, and after a few moments, the steel doors slid open, revealing a golden inside—along with a man standing near the buttons. He wore a uniform, fitted with a hat. When he saw Creed, he nodded his head and said, “Good evening, Creed. Going up?” He looked at me, but he said nothing to me.

“Yes, thank you.” Creed sounded normal talking to him, and he guided me inside, making sure to stand between me and the worker, who hit the button to the lobby once we were in. “This is my sister,” he said. “She'll be staying with me for a while. Inform the others for me.”

“Will do, sir.” The man once again nodded, and the exchange ended there.

The elevator doors slid open again once we reached the lobby, and Creed was the first one out. As I stepped off the elevator and into the grand lobby, my mouth fell open a bit. High ceilings, at least in this area. A big, gigantic waiting area with sofas and lounges. Marble tiled floors, chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, which had to be at least two to three stories high. It was like a grand hotel or something. I'd never seen a place like it—other than the movies.

Creed lived here? Holy crap. He must make a shit ton of money doing security.

We walked deeper into the place, towards another set of elevators further back, behind the front desk and the seating area. Every worker I saw wore the same uniform, and all, I realized, were men that looked like they belonged somewhere else.

Not that I was saying certain people didn't belong in a fancy place like this. It was more like... they were young to middle-aged men, all of them, and they all looked intimidating, even in their uniforms.

“Do I need to get an I.D. or something to come and go?” I asked as we walked along. I didn't know what you did in a place like this.

“No, they'll already have your face from the cameras in the elevator,” he said. “By tomorrow morning, everyone will be aware of you.” We reached the second set of elevators, and he hit the button up.

Same deal going up. Another worker inside, operating the buttons. He knew where Creed lived, and he said not a word to either of us as he hit the button and we went up. I couldn't hide my shock. This was weird, wasn't it? It felt weird.

Creed led the way once the elevator opened for us, and we emerged into a hall where doors sat on either side of the long hall, spaced out pretty evenly. Four or five apartments or condos or whatever these were considered, all on the same floor. Judging by how big the place was in the lobby, I'd guess that no apartment here would be small. No stereotypical hotel rooms here.

We went to the one all the way down to the right, and Creed had to put in a key and input a code to get the door to unlock. As he held it open for me, he said, “We'll get you your own key tomorrow, too.” Once I was in, he went to bolt the door's lock behind us.

Looking at the place, I knew why security was tight. No poor people lived here. Only rich people could afford a big, fancy place like this in the center of downtown. My feet took me through the entryway, past the open-concept kitchen and to a giant, wide-open living room. It had a modern gray sofa

sectional, along with what must be an electric fireplace beneath a big TV hanging on the only wall in the room.

Well, besides the wall of windows, I mean.

I went straight to the windows, finding that from here, you could see a lot of downtown. We were so high up... it was insane. Literally insane that Creed lived here. Turning away from the window, I looked at Creed, who was fifteen feet behind me, watching my reaction to his place.

“You live here? How can you afford it? It must be so expensive.” The place looked sprawling; I’d bet there was more than one bathroom and more than one bedroom. Nothing about this building and what I’d seen so far screamed *minimalist*.

“I do okay,” Creed said. “That glass is one-way. You can see out, but no one can see in.”

Oh, wow. That was pretty cool. I turned away from him, once again staring at the dark outside world. “Is there a balcony?” I’d love to step outside and—

“Balconies are a security risk,” he told me, dashing my hopes of that. But it made sense. I guess you couldn’t be too careful, although up here, we were probably high enough that a balcony would be okay.

“Come on,” Creed said, “I’ll show you what room you can have. It has its own bathroom, so you’ll have some privacy.” He turned away from me, heading across the living room, to the adjacent hallway.

I trailed after him, picking up my pace so I could catch up. We passed what must’ve been his bedroom, mechanical blinds on the windowed walls. His bed was made, dark sheets on it. It looked like he had his own private bathroom, too. I only got a quick glance, because we walked right on past it.

He stopped at the door next to his, where another bedroom sat, this one with no decorations whatsoever. Nothing hanging up, a boring light gray color on the three walls that weren’t covered in windows.

I stepped inside, surveying it. It had no heart, cold and a little sterile, but it would do.

“I can buy you whatever sheets you like tomorrow, too,” Creed said, folding his arms over his chest and watching me as he leaned against the doorframe to the room. “Towels, toothbrush, soap... all that stuff. Anything you need. For tonight, if you want to wash up, you can use mine.”

After peeking into the attached bathroom and seeing a spacious room of white marble, I turned to face him with a smile on my face. “Thank you, Creed. It’s amazing, really.” I went to sit on the edge of the bed, still holding onto that dark-eyed stare. “It’s a pretty big place for you to live here alone. No girlfriends?”

The question was innocent enough, but I probably shouldn’t have asked. It was none of my business, and he’d tell me in his own time if he did. A man like him, with a place like this... he had money, and if there was one thing women went crazy for, it was a good-looking man with money.

Creed waited a moment before saying, “No girlfriends.”

I looked down at the sheet I sat on, both of my hands in my hoodie pocket now. If I was honest, I’d say I was relieved to hear he didn’t have a girlfriend.

It shouldn’t matter. Of course, it shouldn’t matter to me... but deep down, I was happy to hear that. I didn’t know how I’d feel if another woman lived here, if I had to watch them together—or hear them doing stuff through the walls.

Awkward. Yeah, let’s just call it awkward.

“You should shower,” Creed said. “I’ll make you a little something. You need to eat.” His arms dropped to his sides, and he disappeared down the hall. Within a minute, he was back, holding onto a towel and two containers of what must be shampoo and body wash. He went to place them in my bathroom, and I watched, unable to hide the smile on my face. When he came out, he saw that smile, and he frowned at me. “What?”



“Nothing,” I quickly said, getting up. I moseyed over to him, craning my neck back to meet his stare, standing a foot or two away. He really was tall. I didn’t remember him being so tall—funny, since at the time I’d been a kid, and therefore smaller myself.

My voice dropped to a bare whisper when I said, “I just missed you so much.” I could hardly get the words out, like they were top-secret even though I’d already told him I’d missed him. Just how badly I’d missed him he’d never know.

Creed’s gaze dropped, and I hoped he wasn’t looking at my neck. I hoped I wasn’t bruising already there, not so much that it was terribly noticeable. He said nothing, reaching up and brushing some of my hair away from my eyes, tucking it gently behind an ear.

I didn’t flinch or move away; if there was one person I trusted not to hurt me, it was Creed.

“I missed you, too,” he whispered back, saying it aloud for the first time. I couldn’t help but grin stupidly at that; hearing it made me so happy. “What?” Creed almost sounded suspicious.

“It’s just... you didn’t say it back before,” I told him. “A part of me always thought you didn’t miss me at all.” The hand that had tucked hair behind my ear fell to my cheek, his fingertips dancing along the skin on my face until they reached my chin, which he then held between his thumb and his finger, tilting my head back even more so he could look into my eyes.

My breath caught, and I couldn’t move. The only thing I could do was stare up into his dark eyes and lose myself in them. Such an intense expression he wore, gazing down silently at me, and yet his fingers on my chin were so gentle, almost like he was afraid to touch me. We stood so close, and suddenly it didn’t matter that I hadn’t seen him in ten years. This man had been a part of me regardless.

“Of course,” he whispered, his gruff voice so low it damn near brought a chill to my spine. “Of course, I missed you, Taylor.”

It occurred to me then just how odd this might look to a third party. The way he gazed down at me, the way he held onto my chin so softly... was it what someone would consider brotherly? I didn't know. I'd been missing him these last ten years, so I had no freaking idea.

"Then why did you leave me?" The question came out of me so quietly, even I had trouble hearing it, and the moment I said it, Creed dropped his fingers from my chin and stepped away from me, turning his head and closing his eyes.

I was older now, so I knew it wasn't fair to him to have expected to stay. He'd been nineteen at the time, as old as I was now. Just because it was normal these days to live with your family in your young adulthood didn't mean everybody did. Legally, he could've left even before his mom died. He didn't owe me anything.

And yet...

His answer was unsatisfying in every way: "Because I had to." And then he walked away, exiting my room and leaving me in a breathless, confused, slightly annoyed heap.

I watched him go, wondering what he meant by that. Maybe, one of these days, I'd drag the answer out of him. He couldn't hide from me forever, now that I'd be living here a while. We'd be seeing a lot more of each other, that much was obvious.

I think I was a little too excited about that.

Heaving a sigh, I went into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I flicked on the lights, slow to turn to stare at myself in the mirror. Finally, after what felt like forever, I brought out my other hand. It's kind of funny; that hand trembled a bit, even now. It didn't hurt at the moment, but once I started cleaning it up, it probably would.

Another sigh left me as I worked to get the hoodie off me. Thankfully, the fabric was thick; you couldn't tell I'd bled inside the center pocket. I lay the hoodie beside the towel Creed had left me, and then I started going through the

drawers in the vanity, looking for something, anything I could use: bandages, peroxide, stuff to clean the wound.

The only thing I found was an old, half-used bottle of antibacterial soap. It'd have to do.

I took it, along with the shampoo and body wash bottles Creed had given me to use, to the shower, arranging them. It was a giant, walk-in shower, white tile all around, along with a glass door. No privacy whatsoever, but I guess that's what I'd expect from a place like this.

I shut the glass door and turned on the water, my intent to let it get hot before stepping in. My feet took me back to the vanity, and I cradled my bloodied hand against my stomach, staring at my reflection. My eyes dropped to my neck, and I tentatively reached up and touched the skin on my throat.

Nausea flared up in me, the skin still tender, a reminder of what happened. I closed my eyes, the memory too recent and vivid for me to push away.

*I was in my room, drafting a paper for one of my sociology classes, when I heard a door slam downstairs. A typical occurrence at home; Dad had a job, but he hated it. Worked as a painter or something. The hours weren't steady, and since he wasn't the owner of the business, he didn't make a lot. Jobs came and went too quickly. It was why I had to take out a bunch of loans to go to school.*

*I was trying to pay attention to my laptop, to the word document opened before me and all the notecards with quotes and paraphrased passages I wanted to use that I didn't hear the swearwords coming from Dad, nor did I hear the angry footsteps as he came to my room.*

*I jerked when he threw open the door. "You know I have an open-door policy in this house," he growled out, slurring his words a bit. He must've stopped by to have a drink with his buddies at the bar he liked going to. Funny how he always had money for that, but not the electric bill. Going to the library to do my homework for my classes wasn't very fun.*

*But then again, neither was living in this house most of the time.*

*“Dad,” I spoke, turning away from my work, “you know I never bring any boys home—”*

*He chuckled and shook his head. “Not that I know of. Now, get your ass up and come here.” He didn’t wait for me; he turned on his heel and walked away, back into the hall. Dad knew I’d follow him. I had to.*

*Sometimes, it was easier to be silent and nod when the anger inside of him came out. Apologize for whatever it was he was blaming you for so you could move on. Do what he wanted, so he’d stop.*

*Still, that didn’t stop my skin from prickling as I stood and shuffled my feet to my door. I had a hoodie on, along with sweats; typical at-home clothes for me. Comfort over beauty any day.*

*Did that mean I never wanted to dress up? To put makeup on, glam myself up, and go to a party or something? No. I was still a girl. I daydreamed about boys a lot, what would happen if I met someone at a party and we hit it off, when this hypothetical guy couldn’t take his eyes off me.*

*But I was also a realist, and I knew that would never happen.*

*My fingers fiddled with my phone in my hoodie pocket as I followed Dad down the stairs, to the kitchen. We lived in an older house, small, compared to a lot of newer builds in the area. We lived in an old suburb just outside of the city, where a lot of houses, when they went for sale, were bought by flippers who fixed them up.*

*We weren’t so lucky. Everything was just old here, and Dad had stopped taking care of the place after my stepmom died and my stepbrother left.*

*Dad stood in the kitchen, leaning on the counter near the stove, staring at me with glazed eyes. “Can you see the problem, Taylor? I know you’re not the brightest, so I’ll give you a minute.” His fingers scratched along the side of the*

*cheap laminate countertop. It wasn't the first time he'd called me stupid, and it wouldn't be the last. It's just who he was.*

*"I—" It was then I realized what it was he was upset about: dinner wasn't ready for him. It wasn't even cooking. "I'm sorry, I was doing homework—" I went to one of the lower cabinets, pulling out a pan. I was pretty sure we had some chicken I could cook up.*

*It was seconds after I'd put the pan on the stove that I felt fingers pull my hair and yank me back. I caught myself on the counter near the sink, rubbing the side of my head as I stared at my dad. "I'm sorry! I forgot! I won't forget again."*

*He snarled out, "I've heard that excuse before, haven't I? I'm sick and tired of it, Taylor." He lumbered his way over to me, glaring at me like he hated me. "I go to work every day so you can play around in your classes—"*

*Well, he didn't go to work every day, but I wasn't going to argue with him about it, so I kept my mouth shut.*

*"And I only ask for one thing," he growled out, stepping before me. He stood a little over six inches taller than me, but right then, he definitely seemed like he towered over me easily. "For dinner to be ready when I get home. Is it that fucking hard?"*

*"No," I whispered.*

*"What's that?" He touched his ear, like he hadn't heard me.*

*"I said no!" This time I lost it: I shouted at him, right at his face. "It's not fucking hard, but it isn't one fucking thing, either! You want me to cook, clean, do the laundry, mow the grass—you want me to do everything you're supposed to do! You're the parent, not me. You're—"*

*I knew I shouldn't have exploded at him, but I was tired, and so sick of it. I hated being treated like that, hated being talked to like that, especially in my own house. I didn't feel like I was safe here... because I wasn't, and that fact was proven by my dad when he did what he did next.*

*His hands shot up, and within seconds, they curled around my neck. "I'm what?" he spat out, spittle flying at my face as those hands of his squeezed. "What am I, kiddo? I'm apparently dumb as a rock, so why don't you enlighten me?" With every word he spoke, the choking grew harder.*

*I couldn't breathe. I smacked at his wrists, moving my lips to try to tell him I couldn't breathe, but he either wasn't getting it or he didn't care. I then tried to struggle with the rest of my body, but he had me in a good grip, and he was stronger than me. There wasn't anything I could do.*

*But then my eyes spotted a glass in the sink, dirty, from breakfast. Our dishwasher had been broken for two years now, so I'd been handwashing everything every day.*

*Sputtering for any bit of air I could get, I stopped hitting him and went to grab the glass. My fingers just barely reached. Dad was too busy choking me, trying to teach me a lesson for talking back with sick glee, to see me go for it. My left hand grabbed it just as my vision grew blotchy, everything hazy.*

*I didn't know where I was aiming it; I let instinct take over. My left hand curled around the glass, and I swung it as hard as I could at my dad's face. It hit him right on the temple, the glass shattering and cutting into us both.*

*Pain erupted in my hand, but it was nothing compared to the state of my neck when he let it go, stumbling back and clutching the side of his head.*

*"You fucking bitch," he growled out.*

*I didn't stand there and wait for him to attack me again—because I knew that's what would happen. I couldn't. So, I did the only thing I could: I darted away from him, sprinting out of the kitchen, to the front door.*

*My good hand was on the lock, unlatching it, as my feet hurriedly slipped on a pair of old tennis shoes. I had the door open the very same moment my dad yelled from the kitchen, "If you walk out that fucking door, don't you fucking come back, you hear me? You better not come back!"*

*I let his words hit me, only for one second, and then I ran out the door like a bat out of hell.*

Dinner. It was all over stupid dinner and me not having it ready. I'd honestly forgotten, too engrossed in trying to get a head start on that stupid paper. And now I was at my stepbrother's place, because I didn't have any close friends I could turn to without having to explain to them how fucked up my home life was—and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want what few friends I'd gained in college to know that part of me.

Heck, *I* didn't want to know that part of me. It wasn't something I was proud of. It was a part of me that made me sick to my stomach, a part of me I wished I could change. Some people were proud of the person they were, but I wasn't.

But what else could I have done? I didn't have anyone else. I didn't have a mom or a brother anymore. I never had close friends come over, because I didn't want them to see and deal with my dad. The life I could've had had been splintered because of him.

I closed my eyes, no longer able to look at myself in the mirror, at the bruise forming around my neck. Bruises only got worse, and I didn't have any makeup here to hide them. Even if I got some makeup tomorrow when Creed and I went out... would I be able to hide it from him until then? I'd made it this far, but...

God. I was really pathetic, wasn't I? I'd cry, if I hadn't already run my tear ducts dry. I couldn't tell you how many nights I'd spent, lying in bed, crying myself to sleep, wishing everything was different. Life really did suck sometimes, and now I honestly didn't know where I'd go from here.

Not back home to Dad, obviously, but I couldn't stay with Creed forever. As much as I loved the fact that he'd drop everything to help me, I didn't want to wear out my welcome. And maybe, just maybe a small part of me thought it might be easier to just run away and start again somewhere new. Didn't know how I'd do that, or where I'd go, but—

The door to the bathroom opened, and my eyelids lifted the same moment Creed pushed inside. He'd taken off the jacket to his suit, along with his tie, but he still wore the dark pressed pants and the tucked-in button-up shirt.

“Hey!” I pointed out, “I could’ve been naked—”

But that wasn't why he'd barged in without knocking, I realized, once his gaze had dropped to my neck and then flicked over to my bloodied hand.

Shit.

I whirled, giving him my back as I held my injured hand against my chest, cupping it with my other, as if to hide it. I couldn't hide what he'd already seen, though. “Get out,” I whispered, wishing he would.

He didn't.

Creed set a strong hand on my shoulder, forcing me to turn back around and face him. The look on his face was one of pure rage, his mouth twisted into a frown, but I knew that rage wasn't directed toward me; it was to my dad.

Well, maybe some of it was for me, since I'd tried to hide it from him.

“Who did this?” Creed demanded, still holding onto my shoulder, even after turning me around, almost as if he thought I'd try to run if he let me go. “Was it him? Did he do this to you?” When I made no moves to speak to him, to tell him anything, he dropped his hand from my shoulder and narrowed his stare at me.

I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to, and that's why I didn't know why I started to say, “He didn't mean to—”

Creed stepped closer, the intensity coming off him in waves. “Don't make excuses for that asshole, Taylor. He knew what he was doing. People always do when they're hurting you—they're just masters at making you believe it's your fault.”

I didn't know what to say to him. I really didn't know what to say. In the end, I didn't say anything, looking down at the



tile before my shoes. I hadn't even taken off my stupid shoes yet. I—

My thoughts were interrupted by Creed stepping closer, his sleek black dress shoes moving to stand two inches away from mine. His feet were so much bigger than mine, it was almost funny. But nothing was really funny right now.

A warmth blossomed on my hand covering my injured one, and when I looked up, I met Creed's dark eyes. Just like that, I was caught in his web, and I let him move aside my good hand so he could get a look at my bad one. He gently ran his fingers over the cuts the glass had made when I'd shattered it against my dad's skull. It hurt, the wound too fresh, the adrenaline no longer pumping through my system, but I resisted my urge to pull away from him.

For a moment, nothing but the showerhead pelting water onto the tiled floor filled the air. Creed's other hand went to touch my neck, where the bruises were starting to form. I could only imagine what he was thinking, what he thought of my dad, what he thought of me for trying to hide it... and for taking it for so long.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" he asked, his voice quiet. Even so, it'd be a lie to say he sounded calm; if anything, he came across the opposite: raging angry, barely able to hold it in. But he wasn't furious at me. I had to remember that.

I didn't say anything to that, didn't know why. Any word I could've said caught in the back of my throat as he held my stare, refusing to release me from his trance.

"*Taylor,*" he spoke my name with more urgency. "*Are you hurt anywhere else? If I have to inspect every inch of you, I will—*"

My heart did something weird in my chest, and I took a step away from him and his hands, shaking my head once. "No! Nowhere else." Because I could tell he didn't quite believe me, I added, "I promise."

Creed let out a harsh sigh, running a hand along his jaw in what must be thought. "Wash up. I'll leave fresh clothes for

you on the bed. When you're done, you will eat whatever I make you and you'll tell me exactly what happened.”

He didn't give me time to argue with him, for he turned away and left the bathroom, closing the door behind him as he went—and leaving me, standing there, in a bit of a daze. Why so protective over me, even after all this time? After he left? I didn't get it. It made zero sense to me, and as I took off the rest of my clothes and hopped in the shower, I relayed what he'd told me in my head.

*Because I had to.*

He'd left because he had to. It didn't make sense. Maybe, sooner or later, I'd get him to tell me the real reason he'd left, because that just wasn't cutting it for me. There had to be more to it, something he didn't want to say.

And then, as the water hit the top of my head and drenched me instantly, I wondered if he'd leave me again.

My only answer was the blood circling the drain and the low ache in my hand for being disturbed.

## Chapter Four – Creed

I was going to kill him. I, Creed Calypso, was going to kill that motherfucker, make him choke on his own liquid-filled screams. I was going to rip him apart, piece by piece, careful only to keep him alive as long as possible, so he could experience as much pain his mind could comprehend before he breathed his last breath.

I wanted to do all that and more.

I hated that I wasn't there for Taylor these last ten years. I'd thought... I'd hoped she'd be fine. Maybe that was a naive hope to have, but at the time, I didn't have options. I had to take over, officially join the Guild in my mom's stead.

Damn it. *I should've gone back for her.*

As I prepped her meal—nothing fancy, pasta and some garlic bread I'd throw in the toaster—I couldn't help but wonder what she'd say if I told her the truth, if I told her killing her dad was well within the realm of possibilities. That I could do it, and she could even watch, if she wanted.

But, no, she probably wouldn't want that. It might've been ten years, but she didn't strike me as the kind of person who'd ever wish anyone else dead, regardless of what crimes they may have committed, even against her. Taylor was such an innocent fool in that way.

Tom Hill had become abusive. It didn't surprise me, because he'd never been a kind man, but my mom had seen something in him, whatever the fuck that was. Or maybe she'd never seen anything in him, and he was just a cover. My mom had done worse things.

Fuck. I really, really wanted to kill that motherfucker, but if he wound up dead, and Taylor wasn't okay with it, I didn't think she'd forgive me... and I didn't know if I could bear a world where she hated me. The last thing I wanted was her hatred.

By the time Taylor came out of her room, freshly showered and wearing my clothes—a plain black t-shirt with athletic shorts, both things swallowing her tiny frame up—I had her meal ready to go on the island. I made her sit, and I took up the spot next to her with a first-aid kit, gently sterilizing the cuts on her hand before putting bandages on them. The big one had started to bleed again, but for obvious reasons, blood didn't bother me.

Taylor didn't say anything as she ate. She didn't look at me as I bandaged her up, which allowed me to study the bruising on her neck without her green eyes boring into me. That motherfucker had put his hands around her neck and choked her. I didn't need her to tell me that. It was plain as day.

Once I was done with her hand, I closed up the first-aid kit and put it away. I went into my room, into the bathroom, and opened one of the smaller drawers in the vanity. A full drawer of pills rattled about, and I found the one labeled *ibuprofen* and grabbed it. Taylor would probably need it, if not now, then in the morning, when her bruising would be worse. Her hand had to hurt, too. One of the cuts was pretty deep.

I returned to her side, setting the pill bottle near her and saying, “Make sure you take something if the pain is too much. That hand has to hurt.”

Taylor didn't go for it. Her wet brown hair was tucked behind her ears, unbrushed. There were a lot of things I'd have to get her. “I'm fine,” she said, and I had the feeling she said that an awful lot, especially to anyone who might ask her if something was wrong.

She was slow in finishing her meal, but she did take two pills before joining me on the couch. She tucked her bare feet under her ass, looking as small as she could. Two feet sat between us on the couch, and yet it felt like she was miles away.

“Well?” I broke the silence of the space, watching her with an unwavering eye. “Tell me what made you call after ten years.” I realized I might sound a little bitter at that, and I had no right to be. I was the one who'd left, not her. She never

owed me a call, and I... well, I'd stayed away for her own good.

Shrugging, she whispered, "I was just doing homework. He came home a little drunk. I didn't realize what time it was, so I didn't have dinner ready."

"Dinner?" I echoed, frowning. "Don't tell me this is all about fucking dinner." How the fuck could that asshole have done this to her all over a stupid goddamned *meal*? It took everything in me to not flex my fingers into fists; not showing my rage grew more difficult with each passing second.

Taylor bit her lower lip. "Yeah. Things escalated and... and he started—" She brought up her unbandaged hand to her throat, lightly touching the bruising skin. "You know." Her eyes closed, and the next time she spoke, her voice shook with each word, "He's never done that before. I think I was in shock, at first, and then it started to hurt. I couldn't breathe. Nothing I did could get him to stop. I didn't know what to do. I thought I was going to die."

I scooted closer to her on the couch, grabbing her and pulling her to me. She came without a fight, and she curled up on my lap, leaning the side of her head against my shoulder. My arms wrapped around her, holding her tightly. How I wished I could've been there, because if I'd have been there, things would've turned out very differently.

"We were by the sink," Taylor whispered. "There was a glass that I never got to cleaning. I grabbed it and... and I just hit him with it. As hard as I could, I hit him, right on the head. It didn't matter that I hurt myself, because it got him to let me go." She exhaled a trembling breath. "I ran to the door, and he said if I leave, don't come back."

"You did the right thing," I told her, leaning my cheek against her damp head. At least the hand injury was a result of self-defense, but still, she never would've gotten hurt if that asshole could've just kept his anger to himself.

"He'll probably calm down—"

“No.” My voice was firm, and I think shocking to her, because she lifted her head off my shoulder to look at me. “You’re not going back there, Taylor, ever. I won’t let you.” If she thought, after hearing that, after seeing the state of her hand and her neck, that I’d let her go back to him...

Taylor swallowed, her green gaze falling. “I can’t stay here forever, Creed.”

“Yes, you can,” I told her. “You can stay for as long as you need, and if that means you stay forever, then you stay forever. I’ll always have a place for you. You’re my sister.” That last part fought me as I said it, like the words didn’t want to be spoken. Whether that was due to the fact that I’d left her all those years ago or because of something else, I didn’t know.

She leaned her head against me again, clinging to me like I was her lifeline. I had to admit, it wasn’t the worst feeling in the world, being needed like this.

“I was so scared you weren’t going to answer,” she said. “That maybe you changed your number or something. I don’t have anyone else. I have friends, but... we’re not that close. They don’t know what my dad’s like.”

“Well, I answered, and now I’m here,” I spoke against her forehead. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to leave you again. That, I promise you.” I’d do whatever it took to keep her safe, whatever I had to in order to keep her cared for. She was family. She was the only family I had left, really.

Taylor turned her face up at me, and she brought her injured hand up my chest, resting it on my shoulder. “I really did miss you so much.” That sentence was accompanied by a smile, and that smile made me wish everything was different. That she hadn’t gotten hurt, that I hadn’t left her ten years ago.

I smoothed down her hair. “Me too,” I whispered back.

It was late, but she made no moves to get off me, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to push her away. I’d hold her for as long as I had to, and I’d be glad to do it. Neither one of us spoke again, the space falling into a comfortable silence. After

a while, Taylor's breathing began to slow, and I was pretty sure she'd fallen asleep, tucked against me while I held her.

I couldn't begin to describe how good that made me feel, that she was so comfortable with me, even after all this time, even after what had happened with her dad, that she could be so at ease with me, so much so to fall asleep.

I let my eyes close, and for a while, I imagined how different our lives would be if I would not have left all those years ago. Would her dad still be abusive? Would he have held back because I would've been there?

Where would we be if I would've stayed?

It was a hard thing for me to imagine, mostly because the life I'd lived these last ten years wasn't a life any normal person could live. It was dangerous, and though I knew I shouldn't have her here, she was also safer in this building than she'd be on the street. The Guild paid for constant security here.

A part of me wanted to go on like this forever, just Taylor and me. Both of us, together, like we should've been this whole time. I couldn't fight the way I felt, how angry I was at her dad for doing this to her, for hurting her. She wouldn't want me to reciprocate his actions onto him... but that's what I did. It's what I was known for in the Guild.

Do unto others as you would have done unto you. A creed of many. The way I viewed it was what goes around comes around, and if someone had to be karma, it might as well be me. If I got my hands on Tom Hill, I'd wrap my hands around his throat and see how he liked being choked out. I'd bet he wouldn't like it too much.

Choking her. I still couldn't get the mental image out of my head. How dare that motherfucker lay his hands on her like that. How dare he hurt her like that. Oh, the violent retribution I would rain down upon him the next time I saw him...

But first thing was first: I had to take care of Taylor, make sure she was alright. She was my first and biggest priority, as she should've been this entire time.

As much as I did not want to move, I also knew it would be better for her to sleep in a real bed, not scrunched up and cradled on my lap. So, I moved my arms, holding onto her as I got up. I had one arm under her back and one under the crook of her legs, and as I moved, she murmured something soft under her breath, something unintelligible, but she didn't stir beyond that. I carried her to her room and deposited her onto the bed.

I helped her with the covers, tucking her in as best I could. Being so gentle... it wasn't something I was used to. My job required a firmer hand and an iron will. If other members of the Guild saw me acting like this, they'd surely laugh—or ask if hell had frozen over. As it was, I knew the next time I saw Jeff, he'd have a million more questions for me about Taylor. I better have a good story ready.

Once she was tucked in and fast asleep under the covers, I turned to go—but something stopped me from taking a step away from her.

I looked back at her sleeping figure. With no light on, it was dark in the room, but the moon outside shined enough light through the window to allow me to see the smooth curve of her cheek, the way her lips had parted ever so slightly, how her hair, still a tad damp, had started to dry all messy.

Something inside tugged at me. I didn't know what it was, but it told me to protect this girl at all costs. No matter what shitstorm came our way, I had to stand by her side and shield her from it. She had no one else.

Even though it was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do, I pulled myself away from her bed, away from her, and left the room. I quietly closed the door, letting out a sigh once I was safely in the hall.

This was going to be difficult. I already knew it. Taylor was going to fuck up my life, even if she didn't mean to. I'd gotten used to being a lone wolf, to doing things on my own, never having anyone with me. It would take a long time until I got used to her being here, to having someone else depend on me on a daily basis.



But I'd do it. I'd gladly do it, because it was her. There wasn't a single person in the world other than Taylor that I'd be willing to do that for.

I knew I should go to my room, but a part of me didn't want to leave Taylor. Hell, I wanted to sleep in that room with her, make sure she didn't have any nightmares of that asshole dad of hers. I wanted to be at her side when she woke up, tell her that it was a new day, and anything was possible.

I didn't go back into her room. I did, however, let myself sink to the floor just outside her door, leaning my back against the wall opposite her door. The back of my head rested on the drywall, and I sat there for a while, just to make sure she was okay. I guess a part of me was worried she'd change her mind about wanting my help and try to run away, and that was something I wouldn't let happen.

Taylor wasn't going anywhere. I wouldn't let her.

## Chapter Five – Taylor

Morning came too soon. I must've slept like a rock, because I didn't remember going to bed and crawling under the covers. The last thing I remembered was sitting with Creed—or, on him, I guess—and then... then nothing. I must've fallen asleep there, and he must've carried me to bed without waking me.

I let out a long breath that turned into a yawn as I rolled onto my side, hugging the pillow my head was on. The room had mechanical curtains at the top of the windows in the room, but they were up, allowing the morning sun to shine brightly through the windowpanes.

I didn't know what time it was; my phone was probably dead. I'd need to get a new charger today, along with everything else. Still, even though the sun was up, I didn't want to get up just yet. The bed was too comfortable, so I let my eyelids fall again and dozed off a bit.

The nice thing about it all was I didn't dream. I felt so at ease here, knowing this was Creed's place, that I didn't dream of what happened. No Dad haunting my dreams, no angry, drunk voices in my head, telling me that I'd fucked up and was a disappointment. It was nice.

Eventually I forced myself to roll out of bed. I yawned, my feet shuffling me toward the door. I didn't know how late Creed slept in, if at all, and I didn't know if he had work today or not. We'd obviously shop around his schedule; I had already decided I was going to skip some classes this week, if only to give the bruising around my neck some time to heal.

My hand curled around the doorknob, and I was slow in opening it. The last thing I expected to see was Creed asleep on the floor, but that's exactly what I saw.

The sight of his figure slumped over nearly made me jump, like he was some giant spider or mouse or something, but when I realized it was him, when I realized he must've fallen

asleep out there because he'd put himself on watch for me, I couldn't fight the smile that formed on my face.

I gently closed the bedroom door and wandered to the bathroom, unable to wipe that stupid smile off my face.

It was weird, but it was sweet. His bones would probably ache today. I didn't know whether I should address it or not when he was awake. I mean, I didn't need him outside of my door. I didn't need a guard or anything. I was fine. I really was fine. Maybe a little shaken up still, but fine.

I hopped in the shower again to wake myself up completely—and to try to get my hair a little under control. It was wild, having mostly dried last night when I was sitting with Creed, kinks and all. Man, what I wouldn't give for a straightener.

You know, some girls had pretty curls. Some girls had nice natural waves. Me? I had a mix of everything; if I did nothing to it, I looked awful. Some of it was straight, some of it had some waves, and near my temples, random curls. It was annoying.

When I was done, I dressed myself in my sweats and my hoodie. As much as I liked wearing Creed's clean clothes, I also knew I would rather go out in public wearing these than his ill-fitting clothes. They might work for nighttime, but in public I'd much rather look like a couch potato on purpose.

Plus, the hoodie neckline hid the bruising on my neck. It had gotten worse overnight; I had a pretty solid ring of purple now. I'd definitely need to get a whole bunch of makeup to try to conceal that for when I started going back to school.

By the time I was done, Creed was no longer asleep in the hall. I walked out into the living room area, sitting myself down on the same couch we'd sat together on last night. One thing was for sure: there weren't enough pillows or blankets here. It was like he hardly lived in the place, everything so minimal. Maybe we could get some stuff to make it more homely in here, too...

Although, was I really comfortable spending his money like that? Just because he seemed to do all right for himself didn't give me any right to ask him for anything.

After a minute or two, Creed walked out of the hall, wearing dark pants and a black shirt. His hair was damp, and even though he'd slept on the floor just outside of my room, he looked well-rested. He looked more rested than I felt, go figure.

When his dark eyes spotted me, he said, "Good morning, Taylor. I hope you slept well." He walked over to the kitchen area, where he started up the Keurig to make himself some coffee.

"Morning," I said, turning around on the couch to watch him. The pants he wore were pretty snug in certain areas... areas I should pay no attention to, like his ass. Objectively, he had a nice ass, okay? Moving on. "I slept all right, I guess."

"How's your neck and your hand?"

I glanced down at my hand. When I'd showered this morning, I'd kept it out of the water—not the easiest thing, let me tell you, showering with only one hand. "Fine." But because I knew he'd ask me, I added, "Hurts a little, but it's not too bad."

"Good," he said. "You want any coffee?"

"No," I told him, "I just drink water in the mornings."

Creed got a glass out of one of the upper cabinets, going to the refrigerator and getting me some water from it. By the time the water had filled the glass, his coffee was about done, and he grabbed his mug before coming to sit with me on the couch.

I took the glass out of his hand with my good one, pushing away the thoughts that raced through my head when my fingers curled around the cold glass. Smashing something similar against my dad's head, the tight feeling finally loosening around my throat...

I sipped from the glass, well aware Creed stared at me.

“We’ll grab something to eat while we’re out,” he said.

“You don’t have to work today?” I asked. “I didn’t know when we’d go out. It’s okay if you have to go to work. I don’t mind staying here by myself. I’m sure I could find something to occupy my time with.” He had to have Netflix or something, right?

“My hours are…” Creed paused. “Let’s just say unpredictable sometimes. I don’t work a full forty hours every week. Sometimes there are weeks when I don’t work at all. I don’t have anything planned today, so it’s just you and me.”

It sounded like he hardly worked, and yet he could afford a place like this and a car like that easily. Who knew security was such a profitable field to be in? I certainly didn’t, but then again, there were probably lots of jobs that I didn’t think twice about that paid good money.

“I, uh, don’t have a job, so I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back for anything we get today,” I said, running a finger around the rim of the glass.

“You don’t have to worry about any of that. I don’t need you to pay me back for anything, Taylor.” The look he gave me with that sentence made me bite my lip and turn away. “Anything you need, we’ll get. Anything you might want here, besides the essentials.”

“Things add up.”

“I think you’re underestimating how much I have saved up,” Creed said. “It isn’t like I’m spending it on anyone else, and I’m sure you can tell by looking at this place that I’m not spending a fortune on decorating it. Someone might as well get to enjoy the money… and you’re the only one I’d be willing to share it with.” He ended that declaration by taking a slow sip of his coffee, black eyes on me, as if waiting for my response.

The truth was, I didn’t know what to say. Really. It wasn’t every day that your estranged stepbrother offered to spend what might be thousands of dollars on you—and that wasn’t an exaggeration. Clothes, makeup, a laptop for school, a bag

for school, new textbooks... all of that stuff added up. And then to throw in stuff I'd want here, in this big, mostly empty apartment; it was a lot.

We sat in silence for a bit, each of us sipping from our chosen drink. He didn't go to turn the TV on, and neither did I. Those eyes of his were mostly on me, and I pretended not to notice.

I did decide to break the silence by asking, "So, is your code name Black Wolf or something?"

He blinked. "What?"

"For your job," I explained. "Because when I called that number you gave me, you answered it saying Black Wolf." When he still looked at me like I'd grown a third eye, I went on, "Do you call yourself that because of your mom? I know she had a tattoo of a black wolf on her back—"

Creed abruptly stood and headed into the kitchen. Instead of addressing my innocent question, he said, "We should go, get a start on the day." I guess that meant he didn't want to talk about the Black Wolf thing or his mom.

What could I say? What could I do besides finish my water and get up? If he didn't want to talk about it, I couldn't force him to. It just meant I'd stay curious. Maybe he'd tell me later, in the future. It hadn't even been a full day yet, so I couldn't expect him to share everything with me.

Creed had always been an open book for me, but I wasn't a kid anymore, and he wasn't the teenager I used to know, either. We'd both grown, become who we were meant to be. Jury was out whether that was a good thing or not.

When I tell you I hated shopping, I meant shopping with anyone besides Creed, because really, it wasn't so bad with him. Even if he didn't say much, it was still fun. I still felt free—it was also a relief to know that we were shopping at places my dad would never go to, so it wasn't like he'd see us.

I didn't know what Dad would do if he saw me with Creed. He wasn't exactly the kindest man, so I was sure he'd

have some furious words for me, maybe some name-calling. He'd have some for Creed as well, probably demand some kind of money for abandoning him all those years ago, because he'd gotten used to having a wife who could help pay the bills and fund his drinking.

Yeah. My dad wasn't a good guy. I knew that, of course. I wasn't stupid. I knew a parent should never do the things he did or say the things he said, and yet I still caught myself making excuses for him, like he needed me to defend him and his honor.

He didn't have any honor, though. My dad was as dishonorable as a person could be.

Anyway, back to the shopping. After we got some breakfast, we went everywhere. Like, literally everywhere. To the local mall, to the department stores, to a few places in the mall where I was able to get makeup and a few other things.

And I got everything. Clothes, shoes of all kinds, a few jackets, pajamas. Fuzzy blankets, a new set of sheets for the bed. More pillows. Soft towels, along with the other essentials.

We went to the office store, where Creed bought me a laptop to replace the one I'd left at home, along with a phone charger. He asked if I wanted a new phone, but seeing as how mine still worked, I said no. Maybe a part of me still viewed that cell phone as my one link to my dad, and I wasn't quite ready to give it up yet.

The man had choked me out. He might've killed me if I hadn't done what I did, so I shouldn't want anything linking me back to him. He was an ass, and yet he was still my dad, the only family I had. No grandparents or aunts or uncles for me. Just me and dad. Maybe that's why I'd taken his crap for so long.

As the day went by and Creed's car grew full of bags and boxes, I lost track of how much he spent on me. He'd told me a few times not to worry about the price of things, that if I wanted something, I should get it. He'd persuaded me against getting a cheap laptop, guiding me to one that cost four times

as much. The guy at the store said it was the best model they had.

As for my textbooks, I had to order them online, because the last thing I wanted to do was go to campus right now. Besides, I could find them cheaper online, anyways. Save a little bit after blowing so much of it today, even if it wasn't my own money.

Creed didn't seem to mind being dragged from place to place, nor did he seem to care about spending so much money on me. I didn't think his card had a daily spending limit.

He didn't talk much, though, and I wondered if it was because of what I'd said earlier, if me bringing up his mom had upset him. I hoped not, and I tried not to think about it too much. If he didn't want to tell me, that was okay. He had every right not to tell me everything. We might be stepsiblings, but we were pretty much strangers after ten years, not knowing much about each other.

It wasn't right, being strangers with Creed.

When we were done shopping for the day, Creed said he was going to put an order in at a restaurant and we'd pick it up and take it home with us... along with a literal car-load full of stuff, all for me. I didn't think I'd ever gotten so much stuff in a single day before, and as uncomfortable as it was to spend someone else's money, it was also kind of fun.

We got Chinese, and soon enough we were back at his place, sitting on the couch, eating. I'd turned on the TV and put something on—yes, thank God, the man had Netflix. He also had a bunch of other streaming services, which meant I'd never have nothing to watch. Anytime I wanted to watch a show that was a streamer exclusive, I had to go to Beth's dorm room and watch it with her.

Beth. She was probably my best friend, I guess. We'd become friends after being partners in chem lab last year, and we'd commiserated enough that we'd bonded. She brought me into her friend group, a bunch of semi-nerdy girls and guys that all had the same interests, something I never had in school before.



I did miss Beth, but she was someone who didn't know the dark truth of my life. She didn't know about my dad or even that I had a stepbrother. I'd wanted her to be the one normal part of my life.

We'd brought up the bags in multiple trips, but nothing was unpacked. They littered the floor in the front area and the kitchen, some of them on the island countertop. I'd probably spend all night unpacking and getting everything how I wanted it.

Tomorrow was play with makeup day, figure out how to best cover the bruising on my neck so I didn't have to wear a hoodie all the time.

I finished eating, leaning forward to set the empty to-go container on the coffee table in front of the sectional Creed and I currently sat on. When I turned my head to look at him, I found his dark eyes on me, not the television hanging across from us.

As I leaned back, tucking my legs under me, I said, "Thank you for today." My textbooks were scheduled to be delivered later this week; I'd have to start anew on my papers and other homework, but I liked to think I was pretty good at that stuff, so I could whip it all out.

Creed was measured in looking away, dropping his stare to the small amount of food he had left. "You're welcome," he said. "When are you going back to school?"

"Probably not this week. I want to give this some time to heal before I do," I said, lightly touching my neck. "I don't want to answer a million questions if I can't cover it up good enough."

"Are you sure you don't want me to talk to your dad?" Something in his voice hardened. "I can set him straight."

"No." Never before had a word flown out of me so quickly. "No. Don't." Creed didn't appear too thrilled at that, but I hoped that meant he'd begrudgingly listen to me. It wasn't the first time he'd offered to speak to my dad, and I doubted it would be the last.

And, anyway, I was pretty sure he meant more than just talk. I had the feeling Creed would unleash his inner beast on my dad—but I wasn't the kind of person who took glee in the thought of having someone else hurt like that, even if they did deserve it. My dad definitely did.

“You don't really talk a lot about yourself,” I said, trying to change the subject. “What have you been up to the last ten years, besides working?” I always assumed he'd left, like, really left—as in the state—not that he was less than a half an hour away, just ignoring me and my existence. It still hurt when I thought about it... which was why I tried not to think about it.

Creed shrugged. “There's not much to tell,” he said. He set his container near mine, leaning back and lifting his arms, resting them on the back of the couch. He sat two feet away, his knees apart. Wearing all black, with that dark hair and piercing black stare, he was the kind of guy a lot of ladies would love to latch onto. Handsome. Devilish, almost.

“Oh, come on,” I said, grinning at him. “There has to be something.”

“I work. I come back here, hang out, work out. Same old shit, different day,” he spoke with a frown. “I'm not that interesting, Taylor.”

“I don't believe that for a second.” The look he gave me was a little confusing. It kind of felt like he wanted me to stop talking, but also that he was flattered to hear I didn't think he wasn't interesting. “You know what I think? I think you just don't want to talk about yourself to me. Maybe you're worried that I might not understand your life, being as glamorous as it is—” That got him to smirk and roll his eyes at me, which only made me grin harder. “—or maybe you're worried that I'll get upset hearing about everything you've done while I was stuck with my dad.”

Creed's smirk lessened, and he sighed. He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, still staring right at me. That stare pinned me down and made me warm in certain places, so intense.

*Calm down, Taylor, I told myself, he's your stepbrother, not some hot guy you're going to hook up with. Your brother. He's your brother.*

As much as I told myself that, it always seemed to ring hollow, because he wasn't really my brother. We didn't grow up together. I mean, the first half of my life, yes, but he'd been missing these last ten years.

My voice got quiet as I looked away, mostly to calm my thoughts, "I don't hate you for leaving me, Creed. I just wish you would've been a part of my life these last ten years. But that doesn't mean I don't want to hear about your life and what you've been up to. If anything, it makes me want to hear about it more, because I missed it." When I looked back at him, my breath caught in my throat.

God, he really had that intense stare down pat.

"I missed *your* life," he said. "So why don't you tell me everything about you these last ten years? Tell me how high school went, why you picked the major you did, all that stuff. I wasn't there for you, so I want to hear all about it."

I chuckled, and took a page out of Creed's book by saying, "I'm really not half as interesting as you're making me out to be."

"I doubt that."

There he was with his short, super intense replies. The power and vehemence behind those words made me do the one thing I never liked doing: talk about myself. "I wanted to learn more about how the mind works. I'm hoping to get into HR or something when I graduate in a few years. And as for high school... it was basically a shit show."

"A shit show? Why?"

I shrugged. "It was just... temporary. Even college is. I can't shake that feeling. I never really made close friends, so it wasn't like I had a group of girls to hang out with in school. I was the girl who was always picked last in gym class—partially because I'm no good at sports, but also because I didn't have friends."

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. There’s always someone who’s picked last. That’s just how it is.”

“Yes, but it should never be you,” Creed whispered. Even though there were two feet between us on the couch, it felt like he was right beside me, those dark eyes of his boring into me, pinning me in place. “You should always be picked first.”

That got me to laugh. The sentiment was sweet, but I was more of a realist than that—and besides, it wasn’t like I hated anyone for picking me last. I understood it at the time. High school was all about cliques and friend groups, finding where you belonged. I just never found that out for myself.

What Creed said next caught me a little off-guard, but since I’d asked him last night about any girlfriends, I supposed it was only natural for him to ask it of me: “I take it that means no boyfriends?”

I wanted to laugh at that, but the look on his face was too serious. All I could do was shake my head once and say, “No boyfriends.” It wasn’t for a lack of trying; boys just didn’t seem to like me too much. “The closest I’ve ever been to a boyfriend was Johnny Vargas, and he pretty much ditched me right after prom.”

Or, right after we’d left prom to do some, let’s just say, adult things. Yeah, the experience was awful, but at least I knew what to expect now when it came to guys. Wham, bam, done, thank you ma’am, next. No romance novel stamina here. Not in the real world.

“I don’t know why anyone would ditch you,” Creed spoke quietly, eyes on me.

“Yeah, well, you’re my stepbrother, so you have to say that.”

“I mean it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I bit the inside of my cheek and turned my face away from him to hide the blush that was surely creeping up my cheeks.

Because I wanted the attention off me and my lack of love life, I muttered, “Why don’t you have a girlfriend? For someone like you, it has to be easy to attract all kinds of attention.” I still couldn’t look at him while I said it, but I could imagine his reaction well enough.

“Someone like me?” Creed echoed, sounding faintly amused. “What’s that supposed to mean, Taylor?”

Closing my eyes, I turned my head toward him, hoping my blush had faded at least a little. When I opened my eyes, I found him watching me with a smirk on his face. “You know what it means. You’re well off and you obviously have a good job. You dress nice. You’re not bad to look at—”

Ah, maybe that was something I should’ve kept to myself? Oh, well. Too late now.

I decided to quickly say, “All I’m saying is, you have a lot of qualities that many women find attractive.” Oh, God. Somehow, I ended up embarrassing myself more. Go me.

“Do I, now?” That serious expression of his flickered with even more amusement. Creed had to know I’d dug myself into a hole here, and he must’ve found it funny, because he wouldn’t let it go. “Do I have a lot of qualities women find attractive?”

“Well... yeah.” I swallowed. This, uh, wasn’t going how I expected it to. I’d tried to turn the tables on him and his dating life, and instead I was still the uncomfortable one. I mean, what kind of girl didn’t like a good-looking man in a suit? Dress clothes on men were like lingerie on women: instant kryptonite.

“Maybe I’ve been waiting for someone.”

“Who?” I could barely get the word out.

“The right woman,” he said, and then he pointed at me, still smirking. “Maybe if you didn’t dress like you just rolled out of bed, you’d have more guys interested.” Creed, ever the stoic man, was cracking a joke.

I think.

“Hey!” I huffed, glancing down at my hoodie. “This is comfortable! And I don’t need to dress up to impress anyone. If I want to dress up, I do it for myself.” Okay, that was a lie. I was a nineteen-year-old girl. Of course I dressed to impress cute guys sometimes, even if there was no hope of them liking me back.

“I should be thankful you enjoy looking like that,” Creed went on, dismissing everything I just said with a wave of his hand. “It means I don’t have to beat down any boys trying to get with you.”

*Beat down?* I let out a chuckle, mostly out of disbelief. He wouldn’t...

Creed shot me a look, and I knew right then: he totally would.

“Well, maybe with all my fancy new clothes, I’ll catch the attention of one of the campus hotties—”

“Campus hotties?” He sounded utterly ridiculous saying those two words with his deep, gravelly voice. His dark stare narrowed at me a bit, his suspicion evident.

“Yeah, you know, the guys every girl on campus want to hook up with. You’re not that much older than me; you had to have some of those people in your grade, even in high school. The ones on their own level.” Even as I said it, I knew it then: the guy in his grade that every girl and probably some of the guys wanted to hook up with was him. Had to be.

A muscle in Creed’s jaw tensed, and he was measured in saying, “I don’t know about that. But as for these ‘campus hotties,’ you should give me their names.”

Again, I found myself laughing. “Why? So you can stalk them and scare them? Are you going to be my big, protective older brother again?”

Creed leaned back with a shrug. “I never should’ve stopped. But, yes, if any guy tries to get with you, I’ll need to check them out, first.”

“Of course, sir, should I make up an application to give potential boyfriends to fill out? Have them answer a bunch of

intrusive questions, maybe get it notarized?" I deadpanned.

"I'd rather meet them myself. People can lie on tests. I know how to read people." When I didn't say anything to that, he asked, "Is it really so bad of me to want to make sure no one comes into your life just to fuck around? I left you once, and I'm not going to do it again."

"I'm in college, Creed. Fucking around is pretty much all everyone does. That's, like, the whole point—besides getting a degree." It was my turn to shrug. "And what if *I* want to fuck around? Maybe I—"

"No," Creed said, and that one word shut me up. It wasn't the word itself that made me shut up; it was how he said it, like it was an order. A command no one would be able to refuse, least of all myself.

It took me far too long to say, "No?"

"That's what I said."

I stared at him for a minute, my mouth open. It took me far too long to formulate a response, and once I figured out what I was going to say to him, I got to my feet, set my hands on my hips, and told him off, "You don't get to tell me what I can and can't do."

Creed stood, the movement deliberately sluggish. He stepped closer to me, towering over me easily. His head angled down, and his dark gaze captured my stare and held it hostage, refusing to let it go. "I left you once," he told me, his voice a deadly sort of serious. "I'm not going to do it again." Less than six inches between my chest and his; he stood that close to make a point.

I didn't come to him so he could protect me from the fuckboys of the world or the anger of my dad, so I told him that: "I don't want you to protect me. I just want you to be there for me." My defiant stance wavered, and my hands fell off my hips. Still, his gaze wouldn't let mine go.

"I can be there for you and protect you at the same time," he whispered. One of his hands lifted and touched my cheek, his fingers drawing down along the curve of my jawline in a

touch that sent butterflies aflutter in my stomach. “There are so many people out there who would hurt you, just like your dad. Some worse. If I can save you from it, I will, whether you want me to or not.”

I didn’t know what to say. Was this Creed being sweet, or was this Creed being controlling, possessive... and jealous of potential future boyfriends of mine? I honestly didn’t know what to think.

His fingers were still on my jaw; they’d fallen near my chin. The only word I could say was his name: “Creed.” It came out of me in a bare whisper, breathy and wispy, so soft any gust of wind would’ve carried it away. I was surprised he heard it over the sounds of the TV.

Creed’s gaze dropped as his thumb moved over the skin on my chin, lightly trailing over my bottom lip. When that thumb touched my lip, my breath caught, a tiny shock of warmth zapping through me. “I do love the way you say my name,” he whispered as his thumb continued to graze my bottom lip. “No one else has ever said it quite like you do.”

No words came from me, probably because anything I thought to say would’ve made no sense. It was hard to think under the intense scrutiny of his dark eyes, and add that to the way he currently touched me, how close he was to me...

In that moment, he didn’t feel like a stepbrother. He felt like something else, something so much more.

His thumb once again roamed over my bottom lip, this time less tentative, a bit firmer in its movement. “Oh, Taylor. What am I going to do with you?”

I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t know. I didn’t know a lot of things, apparently, and what Creed was going to do to me was only one of them. It was like his stare had hypnotized me, captured me and stunned me, like he’d charmed me with magic. I couldn’t explain the way I felt, or how it was happening. I couldn’t do much of anything besides let myself get caught like cornered prey.



In that analogy, Creed was the hunter. He was the hunter and I was the prey, but you know what? I didn't think I'd mind too much.

He let out a labored breath and took a step back, pulling his hand away from my face. "I should clean up, and you should start unpacking all these bags. I can help you bring them to your room." Creed said nothing else, turning away from me as he grabbed the to-go containers on the coffee table and moved around the sectional, heading into the kitchen to toss them out.

Though a part of me was sad he'd pulled away, the majority of me was relieved. Maybe because I'd been so confused at what I'd felt right then; he'd been less of a stepbrother and more an attractive man I felt a connection with.

Yeah. That wasn't right. I'd looked up to him for years before he'd left. Back then, he'd been my brother. I guess I was old enough now to realize we weren't related by blood... and that lent some form of temptation into this whole thing. I mean, he was definitely one of the hottest guys I'd ever seen in my life.

But again: wrong. It was wrong, so I had to shove those feelings and wrong thoughts down, pretend not to have them, until they stopped appearing altogether.

Easy, peasy, right?

## Chapter Six – Creed

Days went by, and it got harder and harder to keep things straight. I struggled with myself and my control when I was with Taylor. I couldn't fucking help it. The way she'd look at me with those big, green eyes, wordlessly asking me to save her; how could I not feel a certain kind of way?

I needed a job. I needed to take a job so I could have some time away from Taylor and figure this all out. She was my sister. Stepsister. Whatever. We were family, and there were certain lines you just shouldn't cross.

I left Taylor alone and went to the Hooting Owl. A shitty name for the place, but it was as inconspicuous as something could come. Jeff was working the bar, only a few customers around, since it was early afternoon. All other Guild members.

Jeff looked up. "Hey, man. Long time no see. How you been? No, scratch that, I don't give a shit about you." He leaned on the counter, giving me a smile, his eyes lively. "How's that cute sister of yours?" The way he said it, coupled with the glint in his eyes, made me frown at him, because I knew what he was thinking.

Jeff was just like most men, and most men when they looked at someone they thought attractive only had one thought. One desire.

I walked up to the counter, my hands shoved in my pockets. I wore a suit; looked like a businessman. In a way, that's what I was. My work just didn't involve paperwork. "Don't," I warned him.

"Don't what?" Jeff asked, acting innocent. "All I'm asking is how your sister's doing. It's just a question, dude." The man could handle himself among dangerous clients; it's why he worked here. And yet, if things got down to it, he wouldn't be

able to hold a candle to me or the others higher up in the Guild.

“We both know it’s not just a question,” I growled out. All this time around Taylor, and I’d had to work to hold myself back in every respect. She thought she knew the real me... but she was wrong. She didn’t know the real me at all.

Jeff opened his mouth to say something, probably equally as stupid and more than likely something else that would only serve to piss me off, so I cut in and asked, “The Lioness in the back?”

“Yeah, she’s taking a look at the books,” he told me. “Why? Looking to take another job already? Your stepsister driving you insane or something?” He laughed.

“Yeah, something like that,” I muttered, walking away from him. Oh, she was driving me mad, but not in the way she should’ve been.

I headed to the back, where a wooden door sat just aside the far end of the bar. It was labeled in big, bold letters *employees only*, and an obvious security camera hung on the wall nearby, blinking its quiet stare, watching anyone who went in or out. Pushing through, I entered a dim hallway that seemed to narrow the further in you walked.

In what was the back end of the building, an office sat. Its door was closed, but the moment I reached it, a woman’s voice called out, “Come in, come in.” Short, snappy, and to the point, just as the Lioness always was. She’d probably seen me on the cameras and knew exactly how long it’d take me to walk down the hall.

I headed inside the closed office, shutting the door behind me. The Lioness was a middle-aged woman, hard around the eyes. Her hair was a dirty blond color, much the same as a lion. She wore a pinstripe suit—very gangster-looking—and dark red lipstick. She sat behind a desk, stacks of money before her in various piles. She had a cigarette lit, and it was with that hand that she gestured for me to sit in one of the chairs facing the desk.

I tossed a glance over my shoulder, seeing a wall of televisions that played the security footage live from all angles of the place. Even the bathroom had cameras, though the stalls were private.

Once I sat down, she didn't speak right away. She finished counting her current thick stack of money, and then she took a long puff from her cigarette. The smell of tobacco didn't bother me, so when she blew the smoke out in my direction, I didn't even blink.

Pausing in her counting, she leaned back in her high-backed leather chair and gave me a smile. "Black Wolf," she spoke my codename for the Guild. "What can I do for you today? I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I was hoping you'd have word of another job coming up," I said. "One for me." The Guild was often a whoever-got-it-first situation, but certain jobs required a certain touch—and then there were the clients that wanted to pick from the roster of eligible members.

"Looking for a job so soon? Normally you take a few weeks off between jobs, don't you?" she asked, cocking her head at me and inhaling her chosen poison again. The Lioness was the head of the Guild for a reason; she knew each and every member. She had to.

"Yes, but... I was hoping to flex my muscles a bit."

She hummed, the corners of her red lips curling up in a serpentine smirk. She lowered the cigarette to the crystal ashtray, tapping the cigarette against its lip. Ash fell from it, collecting in the tray. "Would this have anything to do with the girl that met you here the other night?"

When I only stared at her, she chuckled. "Oh, don't look at me like that. You know I see everything that goes on in this bar. If you wanted privacy, you would've met her somewhere else." She ran her tongue over her bottom lip. "Who is she to you? Someone I need to worry about?"

I shook my head. "No. She's... she's—" I couldn't quite think of what to say, how to describe her.

She was Taylor. She was my sister, but she was more than that. My guilt, my regret, molded into the shape of a beautiful young woman who'd come to me for help.

The Lioness outright grinned, something she didn't do often. "She's got you tongue-tied, eh? Never thought I'd see the day." She brought the cigarette to her lips again, taking a slow drag from it. "Your mother never got like that, not even for your father. When she told me she was getting married again, I thought she was crazy. Usually Guild members stay in the Guild, for obvious reasons. She told me she wanted a normal life to go home to... but that didn't work out too well for her, did it?"

All I could do was stay quiet. It was unwise to speak back when you were talking to the Lioness. Out of everyone in the Guild, she was perhaps the deadliest. It's why she was on top.

"I know who the girl is. I know every family member of every Guild member," she told me. "I hope she's not a weakness to you. I'd hate for you to lose your edge all over a pretty face like that."

"I won't let her affect my work," I said, meaning it.

The Lioness sighed, and she set her cigarette down on the ashtray before leaning forward, her stare holding mine. "She better not, because if she does—"

"She won't," I repeated, more firmly this time. The Lioness knew who I was, knew who she was talking to. It was pointless to make such threats toward me—and besides, if she ever thought she could lay a finger on Taylor and I wouldn't do everything in my power to defend her, she was wrong. The Guild was my life, but Taylor was my soul.

She didn't say anything right away. She simply held my stare, emotionless, her expression giving nothing away. But then, after a minute, she chuckled and said, "Always so serious, just like your mother. But, back to the reason you're here: no, I don't have any current jobs for you, but there might be something working its way up the pipeline. Check back with me the beginning of next month—this time at HQ, please."

I hated going to the Guild's headquarters, mostly because the place wasn't my style. All glass, all windows, everywhere, on one of the top floors of one of the tallest buildings downtown. Plus, anytime I went, I always saw people who wanted to talk to me, have pointless conversations with me. Like I wanted to talk about the damned weather or fucking sports.

"Thank you," I said, even though there really wasn't much to be thankful for at all. This whole visit had been a waste.

The Lioness made a shooing motion, and I got up to leave. I made it to the door when her voice stopped me: "Be careful with her, Black Wolf. Sometimes the deadliest things in this world are the most innocent." That's all she said, and she offered no other explanation to further tell me what the hell she meant by it.

Did she mean Taylor was here to spy on me or something? A plant to try to get into the Guild? No fucking way. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Taylor hadn't a clue about the Guild or what I did. If she knew... if she knew, she probably would never have come to me in the first place.

I left the office, heading through the dim hall, back toward the bar. When I emerged, Jeff called out, "Should've warned you she's in a bad mood today."

I went toward the bar, leaning an elbow on its counter. "She's always in a bad mood," I muttered, frowning. I frowned even harder when Jeff came over to me, his arms folded over his chest.

"I take it you didn't get what you wanted," he said.

I let out a mix between a sigh and a groan. "I need a drink."

Jeff uncrossed his arms and tapped the counter near me. "Now that's something I can help you with. One drink coming right up." He went to work, pulling down something from the top shelf and getting out a small glass. He poured me about an inch of something clear, and he slid it down to me.

“Have one with me,” I told him. I was pretty much a lone wolf, didn’t have friends, but if I did, I supposed Jeff might be one of them. The man might stick his nose into areas it didn’t belong on occasion, but the man wasn’t half-bad. I knew a lot worse people, and all those people worked for the Guild. Yeah, let’s just say I hated most of my co-workers, if you could call them that.

Jeff relented, pouring himself the same drink. I raised my glass toward him, saying, “To the Lioness and her bad moods.”

He was about to clink his glass with mine, but he stopped short. “Nah, I’m not going to toast to that. Here’s to your stepsister.” He lifted his eyebrows at me, clinked his glass to mine, and then downed the entire cup in one gulp, wincing hard afterward.

Bastard.

I drank mine, practically slamming the glass on the counter. “I’ll remember that,” I told him, reaching into my wallet and pulling out a twenty to pay for the drink.

“I’m sure you will, big guy.”

He took the twenty, asked if I wanted change, and I shook my head. It was as I pushed away from the counter that my phone rang. My stomach hardened. I’d given Taylor my cell; it wasn’t the same number she’d called before. That was a forwarding service used by the Guild—no messages allowed.

It wasn’t Taylor, though. In fact, the name that popped up on the screen was a name I’d completely forgotten about since Taylor had come back into my life. Someone I’d used for a long time.

Using people was something I was good at. You had to be, if you wanted to go far in the Guild, work your way to the top, make a name for yourself.

Seeing that name made my mood sour, and I answered the call as I pushed out of the bar, “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” A feminine voice spoke on the other line, instantly sounding miffed. “You’ve never greeted me like that

before. Is something wrong?” When I didn’t say a single thing, she went on, “It’s the first of the month on Monday—”

I knew what she meant, and that was why I was fast to say, “No.”

The phone was silent for a while, until she echoed, “No? What do you mean, *no*?”

“I don’t need to use your services anymore.” I didn’t wait for her to say anything else; I hung up and walked to where my car was parked, getting in. My phone rang again, but I didn’t answer it. If she knew what was good for her, she’d give it up and leave me be. If she kept pestering me... I didn’t know what I’d do. All I knew was I didn’t have time for her anymore.

I didn’t want her. I wanted someone else.



## Chapter Seven – Taylor

Beth and I sat across from each other on a picnic bench in one of the few green places on campus. Most of it was all tall buildings, being that we were in the city, but they tried to make do with what space they had. A few trees here and there, along with flowers meticulously cared for.

The wind was bad today, so my hair was drawn up in a high ponytail. That didn't stop the ends from whipping about, but at least it wasn't in my face. My neck still held bruises, but they'd finally started to lessen a little. Mostly I used a hell of a lot of makeup to cover it up.

“Are you sure you're feeling okay now?” Beth was busy asking as she stuffed her face with a piece of the pizza we were sharing for lunch. She'd used her meal plan to get it; she often shared her food with me. Since I lived off-campus, I didn't bother with a meal plan. It would just add more to the loans on my account. “You still look a little... off.”

“I'm not at one hundred percent,” I told her, “but I'm getting there.” I took a bite from the slice I'd taken, chewing and swallowing before I added, “I didn't want to miss any other classes. One week was enough. As it is, I don't really talk to anyone in my criminology class, so I don't know how I'm going to get notes from the lectures I missed.”

I wouldn't call myself a perfectionist, but I tried. I tried hard, and I didn't like failing. It was like every good grade, every passed test and well-written research paper was one step closer to a better life for me. A life away from my dad.

He was my dad, but he wasn't a nice man. It was always my plan to get away from him, to move out of his house as soon as I could, even if that meant I had to stop by his house and check up on him, help him and all that. Make sure his bills were paid, the house wasn't a mess, all that stuff. Things I did now—or did before I'd left.

My throat burned, as if reminding me of how angry he'd been that day, but I tried to ignore it, focusing instead on Beth and what she was saying: "I'm sure you'll be fine. People miss class all the time. And besides, don't you always say you're good at taking tests?" When I nodded, she said, "I think you'll be fine."

I took another bite of the pizza. "How is everyone else?"

"Oh, you know, same old, same old. Just another day in paradise." Her voice dripped sarcasm, and as a result, I grinned. "Sometimes I wonder why I decided to go here and not leave the state for somewhere else. I feel like you don't really get the full college experience on a campus that's in the middle of downtown." She finished her slice and then leaned her chin on her balled-up hand, staring off into space, wistful.

I never understood the whole college experience thing. I guess so many people used college as an excuse to party, drink every weekend, experiment not only in what you put in your body, but also who you did it with. Not once did I ever want to become one of those people who celebrated Thirsty Thursdays.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. If that's what you wanted to do, go for it. I didn't judge. It's just... after living with my dad for so long, after seeing how he got when he drank too much, I didn't want to be like that. I didn't want to slur my words or become so blinded by alcohol that the only thing left to guide me was rage.

"Emma's trying to get us all to go out on Friday," Beth spoke with a sigh. The expression on her face relaxed as she went in for another slice of pizza. "What do you think?" Her eyes fixated on me, and she said nothing else, waiting for my answer.

"I'm not really feeling it. You can go and have fun. You can tell me all about it later."

Her mouth full, she shook her head. A moment later, she was busy saying, "Uh-huh. If you don't go, I don't go. I missed you last week, Tay. I want to hang out more. So... you're coming. It's settled."

“What would we be doing?” I asked. “You know I’m not one for crowds—”

“This is America. There are people everywhere, and there always will be. You got to get used to them.” Beth grabbed her drink and took a swig. “I’m not sure where, but no matter where we go, it’ll be fun. We’ll make it fun.”

I let my eyes fall to the wooden table between us. “I don’t know if I have anything good to wear.” Another excuse—and also a lie, because Creed had bought me more clothes than I think I’d ever had before, but Beth didn’t need to know that.

“You can borrow something from me,” she told me. “I don’t mind. After classes on Friday, you can come over to my dorm.”

I could imagine the changing montage in my head right then, and I literally would rather do anything on Friday than that, but at this point, it didn’t sound like Beth was going to take no for an answer. Not today, anyway. So, I’d let her think I would go, but Friday, I’d have something random pop up, like a paper due by midnight I’d forgotten to do last week, and she’d have no choice but to go without me.

Going out and having fun, regardless of where, might be exactly what I needed, but at the same time, it just wasn’t my scene. Whether it was the local bars or a party somewhere—it wasn’t what I’d want to do on a Friday night. I’d much rather be at home, in my pajamas, getting sleepy by ten o’clock.

Well, given my current circumstances, it’d be at Creed’s place and not home, but you know what I meant.

When I continued to say nothing, Beth smiled and said, “It’s settled, then. I’ll tell Emma we’ll all go.”

I faked a smile back at her. “It’ll be fun.” There was no way in hell it would be fun, but coming up with a last-minute excuse not to go would be easier than persuading Beth right now that I couldn’t. It wasn’t like she could still drag me out Friday night, last-minute, especially if my excuse was a paper I’d forgotten to work on during my sick week.

As if I’d forget a paper. Psh.

We finished up our lunch and cleaned up, both of us parting to go to our next class. I went into one of the taller buildings on campus, heading to the third floor using the stairwell. There were elevators, quite a few of them, but I preferred using the stairs, unless I had to go to the top of the buildings for something. That hardly ever happened, though. Most of the common core classes were on the lower levels.

I reached the room my class was in and took my usual seat. I did my best to pay attention, but during the lecture about the sociology of aging, I couldn't help but let my mind wander off.

Didn't I want to be normal? Didn't I want to pretend that my life wasn't a shit show? Maybe going out on Friday with Beth and her friends would help me, you know, live a little. Have some fun. Everything in my life lately had been so serious, I'd practically forgotten what the definition of fun was.

Yeah, that was pretty sad.

I just didn't know if I wanted to go out. It literally sounded like torture. I'd be one awkward wet noodle, probably, so awkward the others would leave me somewhere, I bet, abandoning me for real fun. How shitty would that make me feel?

That was just a what-if scenario, though, and I doubted Beth would actually leave me somewhere just because I was awkward and boring.

Last Friday night Creed didn't go anywhere. He stayed home with me, and we watched a movie together. He'd even made popcorn. It'd been fun, but a part of me had wondered what he was stepping away from to hang out with me. He wouldn't be there all the time for me; I didn't want him to stop living his life all because he was worried about me.

Sociology of aging was my last class of the day, so afterward I walked back to Creed's place. It was only a fifteen-minute walk, and honestly, walking was faster than waiting for a bus to come, then sitting in a bunch of traffic while waiting for my stop to arrive. There were tons of other people on the

sidewalks during the day, so it wasn't like I was alone or unsafe doing so.

All the while, as I walked, I couldn't decide what to do. Whether I should cancel Friday's plans or suck it up and go. It might be the last thing I wanted to do, but I might also be blowing all of this out of proportion. It might be fun. Who knew? I wasn't a psychic. I couldn't see the future.

If I was and I could, I would've seen my dad choking me and left before it got to that point, but I never thought it would. He might have an anger problem, especially when he drank, but being a single dad had to be stressful. It had to—no. I reminded myself of what Creed had said: I needed to stop making excuses for my dad and the way he'd treated me these last ten years.

I think I understood it now, though. Why people didn't leave. Why they stayed. Sometimes it was easier to stay. Sometimes there was nothing harder than packing it all up and leaving, especially when you didn't have anyone. If I didn't have Creed... what would I have done? Where would I have gone? Beth would've taken me in, but she'd have asked a thousand and one questions, questions I wouldn't have wanted to answer.

The front door to the building Creed lived in was gilded with gold and silver, thick panes of glass between the outside world and the fancy, expensive one lying within. The doorman gave me a nod of his head as I walked inside; Creed had been right. Everyone knew I was temporarily living with Creed the very next day; I never got stopped.

I went straight to the elevators in the back, past the giant front desk and the lounge area. My bag was slung over my shoulders, but after I pressed the up button, I let it slide off my arms and hit the floor. I leaned against the wall as I waited.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel out of place in a fancy, hoity-toity building like this. I'd never dream of walking into this place if Creed didn't live here. Heck, I'd tried asking him once how much it cost to live here, and he'd refused to tell me.

Like, outright refused to give me a number, even a ballpark one. It had to be expensive as hell.

The shiny elevator doors slid open after a while, and I got on after grabbing my bag. The operator took one look at me and hit Creed's floor, not saying a word. He put his arms behind his back after that, white gloves tight on his hands.

I didn't know why, but my gaze lingered on those gloves, on the way he held them behind his back. I'd never really paid much attention before, but it kind of looked like there was a bulge in the fabric of his dark uniform, on his lower back. A walkie-talkie, maybe?

No, this place wasn't the kind of place to have freaking walkie-talkies. Come on, Taylor.

As we rode up in silence, I kept glancing at the bulge, unable to help myself. It was too big to be a cell phone under there, so what... my mind trailed off when I thought of something else it could be.

A gun. It could be a gun.

Were these workers packing? The place was definitely secure; there were so many security cameras everywhere, but to have the workers carrying their own guns... was that really necessary? Did they get a lot of people trying to come in here and rob the place and its inhabitants?

Damn.

I shifted my eyes away the moment I assumed it was a gun, and I inched myself toward the door even though we weren't on my floor yet. My fingers tapped on the strap of my bag, and it seemed like the longest elevator ride in history.

The moment the door opened, I practically sprinted out, turning and heading toward the door. Creed had given me a key and let me know what the code was, so I didn't need him to be home to let me in. In fact, I was pretty sure he'd told me he was heading into work for a few hours today.

I think I made it fifteen feet out of the elevator when I noticed someone was hanging around Creed's door. My feet skidded to a halt, and as my ears heard the elevator door close,

I stared at the person looking bored and checking out her nails.

A woman with gorgeous blond hair and bright blue eyes, maybe in her mid-twenties. She wore heels, along with a tight, red dress that matched the shade of matte lip gloss she wore. The dress showed off her legs and dipped low around her chest, showing the world just how curvy and beautiful she was. The moment those eyes of hers flicked in my direction, I felt very much like a potato.

She stopped checking out her manicured nails, cocking her head at me. “Can I help you, sweetie?” Her voice sounded nice, but there was a hint of suspicion dwelling within it. Her gaze narrowed somewhat.

Swallowing, I resumed my walk to the door, stopping when I stood a few feet away from her. “Uh, no,” I said, holding her stare. My hand suddenly grew sweaty; I damn near dropped the key. “Can I help you?”

She laughed. “No, I’m not here for you, honey. I’m waiting for my man.”

Her words sounded wrong. She was waiting for her man while standing outside of Creed’s door? What... and then it hit me. *Creed* was her man? Of course. He’d told me he didn’t have a girlfriend, but one look at her and you could tell she belonged in this place much more than I did.

Did he lie to me about not having a girlfriend?

“Creed?” I asked, and the very second I said his name, her demeanor changed. Instead of looking mildly suspicious, she looked outright distrustful.

She pushed off the wall, and it was then I realized she was quite a bit taller than me. The heels she wore gave her an extra two inches. “How do you know Creed?” she asked, her voice a whisper, and yet I could hear the wariness in it.

Instead of answering her, which I supposed I could’ve, I threw back the question: “How do *you*?” Seeing her, knowing she was here for Creed... I was anything but comfortable. I didn’t like the way she looked at me, like she was judging me,

like she didn't think I was good enough or pretty enough to be here.

She let out a soft chuckle. "Creed and I go way back. Funny thing is, he's never mentioned you before." She reached out, taking some of my brown hair between her fingers, a haughty smirk on her face, as if she was making fun of my hair and its color.

Even though I wanted to tell her that he never mentioned her, I found myself saying, "He's my brother."

Something in her shifted the very second I told her that. She pulled her hand away from my hair, blinking at me as a huge smile graced her face. She appeared delighted. "His sister? Oh, my! He never told me he had a sister." She puckered her lips and tilted her head. "Aren't you just the sweetest thing."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said, "Uh, okay." I was slow to move past her, reaching the door.

"My name is Hailee," she said. I made sure that she couldn't see over my shoulder to note what the code was, and within thirty seconds, I had the door open and was stepping inside. "What's your name, honey?"

"Taylor," I told her. I threw a look behind me at the apartment. "I don't think Creed is here."

"That's okay," she was quick to say, pushing in past me, so confident that I was stunned and just stood there, letting her swat me to the side like I was a fly, bugging her by my presence. "I'll wait for him."

I opened my mouth, wanting to tell her to get out, that I wasn't comfortable with her waiting here, especially since Creed hadn't told me about her.

Hailee must've noticed my apprehension, because she said, "Come sit with me, Taylor. I want to hear all about you." She walked with a certain sway to her hips, and that sway drew all attention to her ass—which did look great in that dress, I had to admit.



She was pretty, okay? Had the perfect hair, the perfect makeup, the whole thing. I never looked that good, even when I tried to.

I didn't want to go sit with her and talk to her, but... I guess I shouldn't leave her alone, either. Although she kind of pushed her way past me, a not taking no for an answer sort of thing, it was my fault she was in here, and I didn't want Creed to get mad at me for it.

Slowly, I walked toward the living room on the far side of the open space, even slower to set my bag down on the coffee table before sitting down with her. She stared at me all the while, her blue eyes lively and framed by what must've been fake eyelashes. She was the very definition of an Instagram model, the people who got famous on TikTok because they were so gorgeous they always had guys thirsting for them.

I'd never be like that. Who had the energy to do makeup every day? To work out so much you never had an ounce of cellulite on your body? Living itself was exhausting lately.

"So," Hailee started, smiling at me, "you're Creed's sister. I have to say, he's never talked about you before—and yet you're here. I find that strange. How long have you been here?" She talked like she owned the place, with an authority I just didn't have.

"I needed a place to stay," I said. "Creed took me in last week. Before that, it'd been ten years since we saw each other."

"How old are you, dear?"

"Nineteen." I didn't like that she kept calling me sweetie, dear, and honey. It was as if that was her way of talking down to me. I didn't like it at all. In fact, I'd go so far as to say I didn't like her very much in general. She might be gorgeous, but there was something I found off-putting about her. I didn't like her at all.

Hailee flipped her blond hair over her shoulder in a move she'd probably taken years to master. "So young," she said. She glanced at my bag. "I take it you're a student?" When I

nodded, she let out a single chuckle, as if the thought of me going to school amused her. “Good for you. I, myself, was never really good at school. The moment I graduated high school, I said, *that’s it. No more for me.*”

I didn’t say anything to that, because there was nothing to say. It wasn’t like I wanted to go to college; I didn’t really have a choice in the matter. It’s just something that was expected of me... even though it was one hell of an expensive expectation, one I’d pay for years afterward.

“I just can’t believe you’re his sister,” Hailee went on, either oblivious to the fact that I was uncomfortable or not caring in the slightest. “All the time we’ve known each other, and he’s never mentioned you. Not once.” It sounded as if she was rubbing it in my face, like she had to mark her territory or something.

Again, I couldn’t stress enough how badly I didn’t like this woman.

“Well, like I said, it’s been a while since we’ve been in each other’s lives,” I said, looking away, toward the windows. How I wished I would’ve, I don’t know, gone to the library or something. Done something that would’ve made it so when I got back, she wasn’t here.

“I’m curious,” she said. “Creed doesn’t talk much about his childhood. How was it? What was he like as a boy?” She still grinned; I could see her smile with my peripherals. She had to know how uncomfortable this was for me, and she took joy in it.

“Um. He was...” I thought back, back to the days when I had a family and not just a dad who acted like he hated me. Back to the days when I had a stepmom who was a mom to me, a stepbrother who was my everything. “He was always nice to me, protective. He was always there when I needed him.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. I never pegged him as a family man. Good to know.”

That got me to look at her again. I looked at her and wondered just what the hell she meant by that. Something in me prickled, something deep down. I didn't like hearing that from her. I wouldn't say I was jealous; more like on edge because I didn't trust her. Like now it was my turn to be protective over him instead of the other way around.

Hailee was going to say more, but right then the door to the apartment opened, and I leaped to my feet, turning to watch Creed walk in. Hailee remained where she was, not bothering to get up. I stepped around the couch as Creed shut the door.

His dark eyes darted from me to the blond head he must've seen on the couch, and his mouth thinned into a straight line. He didn't look happy, like you would imagine a normal guy would when his girlfriend was around. No, if anything, I'd say he looked pissed.

"She was waiting near the door," I told him in a whisper. "She—"

Hailee got up and sauntered around the couch, moving like a slithering serpent as she walked up to Creed. "Hey, honey. Long time no see." Her voice came out ten times more sultry than it had sounded when she was talking to me, and the next thing I knew, she was pushing between us to throw her arms around his neck and pull his face down to hers.

I couldn't watch that, so I quickly turned and said, "I'll leave you two alone." I hurried over to grab my bag, and then rushed to my room. I threw my bag on my bed. I should start on some homework, or copy the notes from last week I'd borrowed, but another part of me was so overwhelmingly curious that I found myself inching toward the bedroom door and listening.

Creed hadn't looked happy. Hailee had looked too smug. Something wasn't right.

"What the hell are you doing?" That was Creed's voice; rough, angry, and firm. She must've said something to him, something I couldn't hear, because the next thing he said was,

“I don’t care. I told you—” And then his voice dropped lower and I couldn’t hear anything.

I should just let it be. I should forget about it. It was none of my business, and yet it was like something had taken over, and I carefully opened my bedroom door and slipped out. I clung to the wall, inching along toward the living room. It didn’t look like they’d moved from where she’d first embraced him, because I couldn’t see either of them.

This was snooping. Snooping was bad, wasn’t it? Hmm.

“We’ve had the same arrangement for three years now,” Hailee was busy saying. She didn’t sound too happy. “You can’t just cut me out, Creed.” Whatever sugary sweetness had resided in her tone when she’d spoken to me was gone now, replaced by something more bitter and vile.

“I can, and I did. You coming here is out of line.”

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled when I heard Creed’s voice; he sounded upset. I couldn’t say I’d ever heard him talk to someone like that before, like every word that came out of his mouth was a knife, and he hurled it as hard as he could at her. Vicious.

“But—”

“No,” Creed said. And then it sounded like he was walking her toward the door. The clicks of her heels on the ground grew softer the further away they got. “Find someone else to pay your fucking rent. I don’t need you anymore, so go. And if you try to come into this building again, I’ll have the doormen throw your ass out.”

“Just like that, you don’t need me anymore, huh?” Hailee scoffed. “Have fun with your sister, you asshole.” The sound of the apartment door opening cut into her reply, and if I was honest, my head spun a bit. What the hell was going on?

When the door slammed shut, I hurried back to my room, closing the door and sitting on my bed. I stared at the floor, wondering what all that was about. Just the way they talked to each other, it didn’t sound like they were in a relationship.

But then what else could it be?

A knock on my door brought me back to the present, and I looked up the moment Creed walked in. The look on his face told me he wasn't happy. He frowned at me, those dark eyes of his radiating something I couldn't describe.

"You don't let anyone in," he said, his voice so strong I knew it was an order. "Especially her." He said nothing else, turning and walking away, as if that was that. As if he didn't owe me the teensiest bit of an explanation for what that was, for who she was.

You know what? No. I wasn't going to sit there and take that.

I got off the bed and followed him. I followed him right to his bedroom. He was in the process of unbuttoning his suit and shrugging the jacket off. "She was there, waiting, when I got back from class," I pointed out. "I didn't let her in—she pushed right past me like I didn't exist. I couldn't stop her."

Creed didn't say anything to that, but I could tell he wasn't happy to hear it. A muscle in his jaw bulged. He stared squarely at me as he loosened his tie and took it off, tossing it on the bed on top of the jacket.

"Who is she?" I asked. "You told me you don't have a girlfriend."

"She's not a girlfriend," Creed hissed out. "No matter what she would have you believe."

"Then what is she?" Did I have any right to ask? I didn't know. I'd never been in this situation before, so I had no freaking idea. "Who is she to you, Creed?" I added his name to the question on purpose. He'd told me no one else ever said his name like I did, so I hoped it would loosen him up.

He'd unbuttoned the two buttons near his wrists, but he dropped his hands to his sides when I asked that. He stared squarely at me as he said, "None of your business."

"None of my business?" I echoed, stepping closer to him. "She pushed her way in before I could say no, acted like she owned the place, and was so condescending she made me feel like shit. How can you say it's none of my business?"

His jaw ground. “Because it’s none of your business.” He untucked his shirt and gave me his back as he started to undo the buttons.

“If you have a girlfriend, why wouldn’t you just tell me? Why not just say, hey, Taylor, I have a girlfriend, and she’s a total bitch—”

His shirt was halfway unbuttoned when I said that, and he whirled on me, stopping me from saying anything else. He took two steps, and then just like that, he towered over me in much the same way Hailee had tried to—only Creed was way taller than Hailee. He was definitely way more intimidating than she was, and yet I tried to hold my ground.

Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have called her a bitch.

“You want to know what she is?” Creed asked, breathing hard, his head angled down to me. His chest was eye-level with me, his open shirt revealing his smooth, sculpted pectoral muscles. “She’s a business arrangement. Every first of the month, she comes over, and I fuck her until I’m done with her, I pay her, and then she leaves.” He practically hissed out the word, “Happy?”

All that hit me like a freight train, and it took me far too long to say, “What?” None of that had been what I’d expected him to say. Not even close. A... a business arrangement? So, Hailee was a hooker, then? A high-end prostitute for men who made as much money as Creed?

“Did you not hear me, or should I repeat what I said? Or maybe that’s not good enough for you—maybe you want more detail, since apparently my private life isn’t private when it comes to you—”

“That’s not what I meant,” I shot back. He was so prickly, so upset, and yet I didn’t think he’d snap and hurt me like my dad had. I trusted Creed, and it was because I trusted him that I could stand so close to him with him leaning over me and not feel like running away. “I just... she came here, expecting more.”

“She came here because she’s pissed that I ended things. She came here to try to change my mind.” He let out a hard breath and pulled himself away from me, once again giving me his back as he continued to take off his shirt.

Creed ended things with her? Why?

“But she can’t change my mind,” Creed went on, yanking off his shirt with harsh, abrupt movements. The moment it was off, I saw a big, giant tattoo on his back. A wolf in thick, tribal design. All black. It was very similar to the one I’d seen on his mom’s back all those years ago, if not the exact same. He turned to face me, glaring. “Again, not that it’s any of your damned business.”

It took every ounce of willpower in me to not let my gaze drop to his bare chest or the set of abs sitting underneath. He was just as sculpted as I thought he might be. A body like that should be carved in marble and put on display.

My cheeks flared up at that thought, and I quickly turned away from him. Now I gave him my back, if only to hide my stupid blush. “You’re right,” I muttered. “It’s none of my business whether you want to pay a hooker for sex.”

I started to walk out of his room. I must’ve still been pissed off at him, though, because as I went, I told him, “I’ll be home late Friday. Don’t wait up for me.”

I guess I was going with Beth and her friends after all. Probably a good thing, to get out of this apartment when I could. I loved Creed, and I was beyond thankful to him for letting me stay with him, but damn it, that man could aggravate me like no other.

## Chapter Eight – Creed

The water in the shower was hot, but not hot enough. I stood under the showerhead, letting the hot water pelt the top of my head. My arms were up, my hands stretched on the tile wall in front of me. I breathed through my mouth, my lungs ragged. Even now, it was too much.

The last thing I'd expected to see walking into my place was Hailee lounging on the couch like she owned the place, like she belonged there. After throwing her out, I thought that was the end of it, but I should've known better. Taylor had wanted to know all about her.

I shouldn't have said anything. I should've kept my mouth shut.

Or, fuck it, I should've just kept it going. It'd been, what, three years now? I'd all but given up on trying to find an actual connection with someone; the women in the Guild weren't my kind of women, so they were automatically out. Dating apps felt so juvenile, and as for finding someone naturally, running into them in public and asking them out... it wasn't my style. Plus, I didn't go anywhere.

So, I'd been limited. But I was also a man who had needs. I did what I had to. I shouldn't feel like shit for it.

I shouldn't have snapped at Taylor. I didn't doubt that meeting Hailee had set her on edge; Hailee could be a bitch when she wanted to be. It's why things always stayed strictly business between us—although she'd made it clear to me on more than one occasion that she'd love to progress from that business relationship.

But I didn't. I'd never wanted that. And now, with everything, it was the last thing I wanted.

I didn't know how long I stood there in the shower, wanting the water to wash off the recent events, but it had to be a long time. Eventually, I washed up and got out, grabbed



my towel and dried off. I got dressed in fresh clothes and headed out into the hall.

I stopped when I glanced at Taylor's closed door. Should I leave her be, or should I talk to her? I didn't know. I wasn't good at this stuff. I... I wasn't good at a lot of things, it turned out.

In the end, I let her be, and the day turned into night. After going to the Guild and talking to the Lioness there, I had a job lined up next week. Not too far from here, so I wouldn't be gone long. Still, I hesitated to leave Taylor here alone, especially after what happened today.

Maybe that's exactly what she needed, though. Maybe Taylor would benefit from having the place to herself for a little while. I didn't want to hover over her, to watch her like a hawk, but it was hard not to, more difficult to keep myself away from her than anything in my life. I didn't trust her dad not to show up eventually, and when he did, I had to make it clear to him that Taylor would never go back to him.

Days went by, and Taylor pretty much kept herself in her room. She only came out to eat, and even then, she hardly looked at me. Still pissed at me for the things I'd said, or perhaps how I'd reacted. I'd be the first to admit I should've reacted better, but that was hindsight.

Thursday rolled around, and I made it a point to go into her room that night. I was done with the cold shoulder, the silent treatment, whatever the hell you wanted to call it. I found her laying on her stomach on her bed, her laptop before her and a pen in her hand. She was busy looking from the screen to the notebook nearby, jotting things down, but when I came in, she stopped.

Still didn't look at me, though.

I walked to the edge of her bed, sitting on it slowly. "I think we need to talk, Taylor," I started, watching as she sat up. She bit her bottom lip, avoiding eye contact with me like it was the plague. Like *I* was the plague. "What happened the other day. I realize I could've handled it better."

Taylor tucked some of her brown hair behind her ears, those green eyes of hers slow to rise to look at my face. “I guess I could’ve, too.”

Running a hand along the side of my face, my palm was met with stubble. “I’m sorry for snapping at you. I never should’ve. It was uncalled for.” Apologizing really wasn’t my forte; I hated doing it. I supposed it was why it had taken me this long to do it.

But, by my estimate, Taylor didn’t enjoy apologizing, either, because she took her time in saying, “I said some things I shouldn’t have, too. I just... I don’t know. I guess I let my emotions get the better of me.” Her gaze fell to her lap. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. This is my apology to you.”

Maybe the next time there was a misunderstanding, we shouldn’t avoid each other for days afterward, but I knew that was easier said than done. Avoidance was most often the easier path.

Taylor went on, “I was nervous you were going to change your mind and kick me out.”

“Never.”

Still, she didn’t look or sound too convinced. “I mean, I’d get it, if you did. Who wants their little sister hanging around all the time? I’m sure there are things you want to go out and do, people you want to see, like that girl. Hailee.” The way she spoke her name, with such distaste, it was clear she wasn’t a fan of the woman.

“She should never have come here,” I told her. “I didn’t want her here. When she spoke to me last, I told her our arrangement was over.”

Taylor frowned, puckering her lips at me. A pouting gesture if I ever saw one. “Well, I don’t think she wanted to end the *business arrangement*. I don’t think she likes taking no for an answer.”

Holding in a sigh, I knew she wasn’t wrong.

Honestly, Hailee had been perfect for what I'd needed her for in the past. I didn't date, but I was a man. I needed a certain kind of release every now and then, and Hailee had provided an outlet for me. But now... finding my release between the legs of that woman was the last thing I wanted to do.

"It's probably for the best." That pout finally left her lips. "I don't think she liked me very much. She was kind of a bitch." Her eyes widened at that, and she looked at me, questioning. "Am I allowed to say that?"

"You're allowed to say whatever's on your mind," I told her, though the part about Hailee being a bitch to Taylor planted itself in the back of my mind. She better not try to worm her way into my life again; I wouldn't be so nice next time, especially now that I'd heard she was mean to Taylor.

She gave me a smile, but it wasn't a real one, not genuine. It was tight, like she was forcing it. I'd bet anything the whole Hailee thing was still bothering her, but she was conditioned by her useless dad to try to let things go.

"Are we good?" I asked, wishing I could lean over to her and pull her in for a hug, wanting to feel her body cradle against mine. But I held back, just barely. I couldn't go holding her all the time.

Taylor nodded once. "We're good."

I got off the bed, knowing I should leave her to her schoolwork. I started toward the door, my feet seemingly dragging along the floor in an attempt to linger near her, but she stopped me a few seconds later by saying something else.

"I'll be home late tomorrow. Don't wait up for me."

It wasn't the first time she'd said that. Turning back to her, I asked, "Where are you going?" We locked eyes across the room, and I wrestled with my urge to tell her she wasn't going anywhere, that I wanted her here with me. But I wouldn't control her; I wouldn't.

"I don't know yet," she said, shrugging.

“Text me where you’re going tomorrow, at least, so I know you’re not dead.”

That finally got a real smile from her, along with a chuckle of a laugh. “Really? Come on, Creed.”

“I mean it. I need to know where to start looking for you if you don’t come home.”

Still grinning, Taylor asked, “Should I start calling you Daddy now?”

Not a doubt in my mind that she’d meant it in good fun, but the way that question fell upon my ears... let’s just say I didn’t take it as innocently as I should have. “Maybe,” I told her, and almost instantly, her cheeks grew red.

She started to fumble with a response, but I didn’t let her say anything else. I walked out of her room, battling the smirk that was trying to fight its way to the surface.

Things were the opposite of uncomplicated between us, and with how we were going, they would continue to stay that way. But, you know what? I didn’t care. The only thing I cared about was making sure she was safe and where I could keep an eye on her.

## Chapter Nine – Taylor

Beth was ecstatic we were going to a party tonight. One of the college's frats had taken over a building of condos just off campus, which was where I think we were going. Her other friends we'd meet there.

Was I nervous? Kind of. It was my first-ever college party. Parties just weren't my thing. I didn't know what I'd be walking into. Would it be like the movies and TV shows, where everyone was half-drunk and making out with strangers, or would it be different? I really didn't know what to expect.

Beth and her friends didn't strike me as the type of people who frequented parties either, but I guess every now and then, they felt the need to push their boundaries. Which was fine—it was forcing me to push some of mine, too.

Although, Beth didn't ask what made me have a change of heart. She didn't ask me if something had happened; she didn't know I was living with my stepbrother, and she definitely didn't know that I was still kind of pissed off at the whole Hailee thing.

Like, yeah, yeah, we'd talked through it yesterday, but I couldn't wipe the smug look Hailee had given me when I'd first approached her in the hall out of my mind. How she'd instantly viewed me as no competition... not that I was in a competition when it came to Creed, but you know. It didn't sit right with me. It was something Creed wouldn't understand.

A business arrangement. I still couldn't believe it. A damned business arrangement. Creed actually *paid* Hailee to come have sex with him. Like, for one, ew? And, secondly, he was an attractive man. I was sure he could get any woman he wanted. Why did he need to resort to hiring someone for that?

After classes were done, I met Beth on the edge of campus. She lived in one of the dormers, a high building that had at least twenty floors. She took me inside, and we went up to her

room. She had a roommate, but her roommate was hardly ever there, I guess. She had a boyfriend or something that she spent all her time with, always over his place instead of the shared room. Couldn't blame the roommate for that, because once I saw how small the room was, I knew I'd want to be out of there any time I could be, too.

I set my bag down on the floor near Beth's bed. There was hardly enough space to stand with your arms outstretched between the two beds. Each side had a desk with some drawers, along with a closet. Beth had put a small TV on her desk and turned it towards her bed so she could watch while in bed.

As Beth chatted away about what she wanted to wear tonight, I couldn't help but let my mind wander. This seemed like a terrible place to live, and yet how many students lived here? I'd hate it. I'd hate being so cramped all the time. And then if your roommate was around constantly? The tiny room would feel even smaller; Beth was lucky hers was gone most of the time.

"You're about my size," Beth said. "Anything I have should fit you okay." She was a few inches taller than me, but our body shapes were pretty much the same. My chest might've been a little bigger.

"Isn't it a little early to get dressed for the party?" I asked. Although, really, I had no idea what the typical routine was like. It was still early afternoon; I assumed the party didn't really start until nightfall, in which case we had a few hours to kill.

"Oh, you're right," Beth said, moving to sit on her bed. "There's an eatery on the first floor. We can go down and grab some food?"

I wasn't hungry, but I should eat, if only due to the fact that tonight would be a long night. So, I nodded and said, "Okay."

We went down to the ground floor, where the eatery was. It wasn't big or fancy, but they had all the staples: chicken, fries, pizza, salad. It wasn't a buffet; you had to stand in line at

whichever food item you wanted and order it. I got chicken and fries, while Beth got two helpings of fries.

We wandered over to a seat by the window and started eating. Her blue eyes were on me, a smile on her face as she stuffed a fry into her mouth. “Are you excited?”

“About tonight? I don’t know. I think I’m nervous.”

That got her to laugh. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Places with a lot of people just aren’t my scene. And I don’t really know what to expect.” I’d grabbed a plastic fork and knife for the chicken, but it ended up being easier to just tear it apart with my hands, so that’s what I did. I dipped both my fries and my chicken into ketchup. Ketchup was the best condiment. Fight me.

“Well, since it’s a frat party, I can pretty much guarantee there will be lots of alcohol.” At that, Beth giggled. “It’s up to you whether you try anything or not. Beer is okay, but it’s not a favorite of mine. I’m more of a wine cooler gal.”

I didn’t even know what a wine cooler was, but I kept that particular truth to myself. Tonight, I didn’t plan on drinking anything. I... I didn’t know what I wanted to do tonight.

“Whatever you do, never leave your drink unattended,” Beth warned. “That should go without saying. You can’t trust anyone. There will also be music, and probably a lot of hooking up.” She leaned forward on the table, staring at me with a low smile on her face. “What kind of guys are you into? You never really talk about boys that much. Unless... are you into girls? Because that’s totally fine—”

“I’m into guys,” I told her. In all the time I’d known Beth, she’d never had a boyfriend, but she’d gone on dates and hooked up a few times. I’d pretty much kept to myself. With everything I had to juggle at home, it seemed like more of a hassle than anything else.

But now I didn’t have to worry about Dad and making sure the house was clean, chores were done, and bills were paid. Now I could do whatever the hell I wanted, and no one could stop me. Not even Creed.

“What kind? Nerds, jocks...” Beth trailed off, waiting to hear, a look of eagerness on her face. She stuffed another fry into her mouth, patient.

“I don’t know.” I stared at my food. “I guess I never really thought about it. I’ve always been so busy with everything, I never had time to sit down and think about what my type is.” I grabbed another piece of chicken, dipping it in ketchup. “I’m not picky.”

Jocks, nerds... did it really matter how they dressed or what interests they had? What really mattered was personality—although a base attraction had to be there, at least a little.

I didn’t know why, but as I thought, an image of Creed popped up in my head. I guess, objectively, Creed was probably one of the most attractive guys I’d seen, if not *the* most. The dark hair, the equally dark eyes, the thick stubble that gave him a gruff appearance, even when he wore a suit... combined with a deep, low voice that smoothed over you like honey.

Shit. I needed to stop daydreaming about my stepbrother. Just because it’d been ten years and we were both different didn’t mean anything. I’d still grown up with him, still idolized him in the way children often did.

“I admit, I’m surprised you wanted to go out tonight,” Beth said. “You’re always so against it, the whole time I’ve known you. What made you want to come?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I want to do something I’m not used to. Push my boundaries a little.” I bit the inside of my cheek. “Maybe find a guy... I don’t know. It’s been a long time. Since prom, actually.”

Beth’s black eyebrows lifted. “Prom? Dear God, girl, we need to get you a dick, ASAP. I bet what you had at prom wasn’t even good dick—trust me, there’s a difference. Some guys just fumble around, two pumps and done, but others... others know how to work it.” She said all that so matter-of-factly, not blushing at all.



Meanwhile, I blushed simply by listening to her talk. I'd never heard her say anything remotely close to that before, but then again, this was a new situation.

“High school boys are still finding their rhythm, but college boys... oh, they fuck like they've got something to prove. Well, most of them—”

“Beth,” I hissed out her name, reaching up to hide my red cheeks. I glanced around us to make sure no one else was listening to this conversation. The tables around us were empty, but it wasn't like Beth was being too quiet about it, either.

She blinked. “What? It's true. I'm just stating facts, Taylor.” She ate a handful of fries.

We finished eating, and all the while Beth would not stop talking about guys and their dicks. Turned out, she'd hooked up a lot more than I'd given her credit for, and I think she took it as a challenge to find me someone tonight.

I wasn't saying I wanted to hook up with some random guy tonight, but... well, I guess it would be nice to have something more recent—and hopefully better—to drown out how shitty it'd been at prom. Like Beth had said: two pumps and done.

Once we were finished, we cleaned up and headed back to her room, where we started digging through her closet. Her roommate was still nowhere to be found, which let Beth toss her clothes all over the place, including on her roommate's bed.

“I think I'm going with leggings and this shirt,” Beth said, turning around from her closet, holding up a low-cut, silvery top. She held it over her torso, as if imagining it on her. She then tossed it to me.

I was sitting on her bed, watching her destroy her closet in search of things I could wear. I caught the shirt and put it aside.

“What are you thinking?” Beth asked. “Obviously, you can't wear that.”

The way she said it made me look down at the outfit I wore. Jeans and a light sweater. Okay, so, yes, it might read *librarian* a little bit, but was there anything wrong with that? I'd stopped wearing things covering up my neck just a day or so ago; some of the deeper bruises were still there on my neck, but they'd gotten easier to cover with makeup.

Or I'd just gotten better at using the makeup.

"No, no," she went on, kneeling and digging through the floor of her closet. "We're going to dress you up like tonight is your slut era. Ah-ha! These. You're definitely going to wear these." She stood and turned around, holding out a pair of high-heeled black pumps. Basic in design, but beautiful, and certainly higher than anything I'd ever walked in before.

"I don't know if I can walk in those."

"Take off your shoes and practice, then," she instructed, tossing them at me. She stared at me, waiting, watching, and she didn't return her nose to her closet until she'd watched me take off my ankle boots and slide the heels on.

As she continued to dig in her clothes, I got off her bed and took a few steps. I wobbled a bit, but after a few more steps, I was more stable on my feet. I wouldn't go so far as to say I got the hang of it, but I wasn't going to fall and stumble. At least there was that.

Still, wearing these tonight would probably kill my feet. I didn't know if I wanted to do that.

"Ooh, yes," Beth whispered, pulling something out from the back corner of her closet. It was on a hanger, so it wasn't all bunched up like a lot of her clothes were. She spun around to face me, holding it out so I could see, and I stopped walking in the heels to stare at it.

A dress. A short black dress. Two straps near the shoulders, the fabric some kind of shiny, silk-looking thing... basic but made to turn heads all the same. Timeless, something that would always be in style.

"You're wearing this," Beth said. "It's settled."

“Whoa,” I spoke with a single shake of my head. “I never agreed to wear a dress and heels to this thing. Don’t you think it’s a bit much?” I didn’t want to be the only person there wearing a dress. And donning both the dress and the heels... seemed like overkill, didn’t it?

“Come on,” she said, pushing the dress towards me. “You’ll look killer. You’ll turn heads. Tons of guys will want you, I’m telling you. Once we do your hair and your makeup, you’ll be gorgeous, Taylor.”

I was slow to take the dress from her, studying it without saying another word. It did look pretty, I had to admit, and I’d bet it’d look even better on than it was on the hanger. The last time I’d gone out of the house wearing a dress was prom, and we all knew how that turned out.

But tonight was another night. Tonight could be different. I’d spent so long trying to be what my dad wanted me to be, trying to be the good daughter, the one who always kept her head down and never took risks. Maybe it was time to break the mold, so to speak. Maybe it was time for Taylor Hill to move outside of her comfort zone.

“Fine,” I relented. “But I’m still not sold on the heels. I don’t know if my feet can handle heels all night.”

“Oh, we won’t be out all night... not unless you want to be. Who knows? Maybe you’ll meet someone and decide you want to go home with him.” The way she spoke it, as if it was nothing, made me bite my lower lip.

I didn’t know if that would happen, but I guess you should never say never.

As it turned out, the process of doing hair and makeup for a Friday night when your plan was to go out and have a good time took a lot longer than you’d think it would. It didn’t help that Beth wasn’t an expert on hair or makeup, so there were plenty of mistakes made, where she had to redo hair strands or completely wipe the eye makeup off and start new.

She opted to curl her black hair, while I simply straightened mine. I did let her do my makeup after she

finished hers—thankfully she didn't make too many mistakes on my face.

By the time we were done, we looked like completely different people. Beth had changed into a pair of sparkly silver heels to match her shirt, and her leggings were tight on her legs and her backside, showing off the curve of her ass.

And me? I wouldn't say I looked like I was ready for my slut era, as she'd put it earlier, but wearing that tight, short black dress did make me look like someone else. Someone older, more sophisticated. She'd given me fishnets to wear under them, but I didn't want anything under the dress. Well, besides my panties, I mean.

And, I regret to inform you, I wore the heels. They did complete the outfit, I had to say. Plus, they made me a little taller, and my short frame could use all the help it could get.

With my hair straight and my face caked with contours and eyeshadow, I looked like someone else. Not Taylor Hill, but someone who was more confident, someone who didn't take no for an answer. Not the meek little girl I'd been these last ten years, ducking my head and trying to keep to myself.

I looked hot. Sexy, even.

Beth did, too. Her shirt showed off her cleavage just the right amount to entice. We'd be a hot commodity at this party—I hoped so, anyway, otherwise I'd just feel silly wearing this.

Dusk had fallen on the world outside, and Beth grinned at me, her lips sparkling with new lip gloss. "Well?" she asked. "Shall we?" She offered me her arm, and I hooked mine through hers, and together we left the dorm room.

It was only then that I remembered that Creed wanted me to text him where I was going. But, you know what? Too late. I wasn't going to. No, the man could stew about it all he wanted. I kind of wanted to make him worry about me, anyway, a little payback for Hailee, for not telling me about her before.

Beth knew where to go. It wasn't too far from her dorm building, just off-campus. The next block over. Thankfully, I didn't have to walk too much in these heels, and I had Beth by my side to keep me steady.

We weren't the only dressed-up people on the sidewalk tonight; we passed multiple groups of other college students. Some, I bet, were going to the same party we were, while others were hitting the downtown clubs and bars.

It was Friday night in a college city, after all.

The party was being held in a fraternity that had taken over a building of condos. You could tell it was a newer-built place; everything still looked new. The main lobby had marbled floors, and our heels clicked with every step we took. We got on the elevator with a small crowd, and Beth reached for her phone, in the pocket of her leggings.

My dress had its own pocket—another win, in my book—and my phone was safely tucked away there.

“Emma and the others are already there,” Beth said, checking her messages. Her eyes flicked over to me, a sly smile spreading across her face. I didn't know if she was more excited that I was finally coming to hang out with her on a Friday night or if it was due to wanting me to hook up and replace my awful prom memory.

It seemed everyone on the elevator was heading to the same place we were. When the doors opened, everyone walked out. Beth and I were the last to exit, and the moment we walked out into the hall, I could hear the music.

It wasn't the only condo on this floor; there were a few others, but only one had its door propped open and people lingering near it, red cups in their hands. The party had spilled out into the hall.

“Come on,” Beth said, grabbing my hand and pulling me along. “Let's find the others.”

I let her lead me, mostly because I didn't know where to go. It wasn't that I didn't want to see the others; they were fine. They were nice. It might be a stretch to call them my

friends, but that's what I did, so I sounded less lame. We pretty much only had Beth in common.

The moment we walked into the condo, I had to stop to look around. It was definitely a newer place, all open-concept, very similar to Creed's in that you could see straight out the main windows from the moment you walked in. The kitchen was near the door to the hall, and it opened up into a big living room area, where huge speakers were set up. The kitchen itself had an abundance of bottles and coolers strewn about, stacks of new red solo cups ready to be taken and filled.

And the people. Oh, there were tons of people. I didn't even know how many. Lots. Lots and lots. Most were drinking, a few were smoking. Some were dancing near the speakers. They crowded the living room area, the kitchen, the adjoining hall that must lead to the bedrooms and bathrooms of the place.

God. So many people. And the music was so loud... how could you hear what anyone was saying? In fact, it was so loud I couldn't help but wonder why the police hadn't been called.

But if this was mainly a college frat building, that would be why. Nobody was going to call the cops. Everyone in the building was probably already here, partying it up.

A group of three girls and one guy came over to us—Emma, Darcy, Blake, and Simon; Beth's friends. The girls hugged her as they squealed and complimented each other's outfits. They were all dressed up like us, looking good, although I dare say Beth and I looked the best.

As I was content in standing aside and watching, they turned their attention to me, and I kid you not, their mouths dropped. They stared at me like they'd never seen me before, or I'd grown a second head when I wasn't looking.

“Holy shit, Taylor,” Emma spoke, blinking in shock, “you look freaking hot.” Beside her, the others all nodded in agreement, apparently speechless at my appearance.

Beth leaned into me, saying, “Told you.”

I couldn't help but smile at that and tell Emma and the others thanks. I noticed they had drinks in their hands already, and I followed Beth into the kitchen area, watching as she grabbed a cup and picked her poison. When she looked at me and lifted her eyebrows, like she was asking if I wanted something, I shook my head.

I didn't know if I wanted to drink tonight. It wasn't because I was underage; if you were a college student, you were pretty much guaranteed to drink. It was more that I didn't know if I wanted to in general. Coming here all dressed up was already pushing myself out of my comfort zone.

Beth got herself a drink, and we rejoined Emma and the others near the living room. The music was louder there, so anything you wanted to say, you had to practically shout. They swayed a little to the beat of whatever song played, so I did the same, wanting to blend in.

As I struggled to listen to the group and the conversations they were having, I surveyed the area. I wouldn't say the place was full of guys that I'd like to get to know, but there were a few cute faces. Some cute, some outright hot, some that didn't draw my attention at all. A good mix of guys, but none really called out to me.

Maybe tonight was going to be a wash.

Time dragged on. The songs playing on the big speakers changed, all upbeat and fast ones. Eventually, the group finished their drinks and decided to dance. Like, more than just sway to the beat. Really dance. I didn't want to, but Beth took my hand and dragged me in front of the speakers with the group.

I supposed this might be fun... but a part of me wondered if I was trying too hard. My whole life I'd felt different than those around me—and I knew that was because of my dad and the fact that I had to grow up fast to try to meet all of his expectations.

This... the party, the booze, the dancing; none of it felt like me. Not the outfit, not the makeup, not the crowd. This wasn't

my world. I was a pretender here, donning a pretty mask, but a mask nonetheless.

We danced for a little bit. It got hot, maybe because all of our bodies were so close together. Eventually, I mouthed to Beth that I was going to get a drink, and I slipped out of the group and away from the speakers. The music was so loud you could feel the beat in your body, reverberating through your bones. Some people might like that, but I didn't. It gave me an unnerved, almost anxious feeling.

I went to the kitchen, looking for the holy grail of college frat parties: water. It turned out dancing made you hot, and when you were in a crowd of people, it also made you sweat. Drinking anything besides water right now would be a mistake.

I couldn't find anything bottled, so I settled for grabbing a glass out of the cupboard and getting some tap water. Not my favorite, but tap water was cheap. I'd drank more tap water than I cared to admit these last ten years. Don't ask me how; the unfiltered water at my dad's house was one of the worst things to put on your taste buds. Hard water.

Once the glass was full, I turned around, leaning my backside on the counter. I brought the glass to my lips, taking a sip as my eyes surveyed the area. Everyone else seemed to be having fun. I wouldn't say I *wasn't* having fun, but...

Someone walked up to me with a smile on their face; a guy. He wore tight dark jeans that hugged his legs and an equally dark blue shirt. The color made his eyes pop; they were a beautiful blue hue. With shaggy black hair on top of his head, the sides trimmed short, he was the opposite of ugly.

"Didn't you get the memo? You're not supposed to drink water at parties like this," he spoke with a grin. He grabbed a red cup and poured himself a drink out of a keg placed on the island. The only reason I heard him over the music was because the speakers were far enough away they didn't pound inside my ears.

"I must've missed that one," I said, feeling my lips curl into a smile of their own accord.



After he got his drink, he came to stand beside me, mimicking my stance as he took a sip from his cup. “That’s because you missed the last meeting. We go over the rules every Thursday.”

I laughed, which caused him to look at me. He stood a good seven or so inches taller than me; not super tall for a guy, but tall enough to be comfortable. Not like Creed, who was practically a giant compared to me.

“I’m Brandon,” he said.

“Taylor.”

“You go to school at SCC? I don’t think I’ve seen you around.”

I shrugged. “I do, but I usually avoid parties like this.” I took another sip of water, shifting my gaze away from Brandon. The more I looked at him, the cuter he got. And those eyes of his... they were strikingly blue.

“I can’t imagine why,” he joked. “You look like you’re having so much fun.”

Again, I laughed. “It’s not my scene.”

“Hmm.” He made a thoughtful sound. “So, what is your scene, then? For research purposes.”

“I don’t know.” I tried to think of something witty to say, but nothing came to my mind, so I ended up simply saying, “I guess I don’t really have a scene.” God, that sounded lame. I knew it, he knew it, and if the rest of the people at this party had heard that, they’d know it, too.

Though I thought Brandon would leave, he didn’t. He must’ve thought I was playing a game, because he grinned and said, “Mysterious type. I like it.” The next time he took a sip from his cup, his blue eyes never broke eye contact with mine. He was locked in a staring contest with me over the rim of his cup.

I quietly drank the rest of my water, because I didn’t know what else to say to him. Talking to attractive guys wasn’t my forte.

Brandon took the lead, asking, “You here with anyone tonight?”

At that, I shook my head no, but then I added, “I mean, I came with my friend, but that’s it. No, uh, boyfriends or anything.” At the mention of the word boyfriend, my cheeks heated up, and I looked away and down, letting my hair cover part of my face. A small shield so Brandon didn’t see how lame I was.

“Perfect.” He flashed his teeth at me in another smile, and he set his cup down on the kitchen counter, flicking a thumb over his shoulder. “You want to dance?” When I shook my head awkwardly, he asked, “How about going into the hall? It’s quieter there. We could talk more, if you want.” The expression he gave me right then made me feel like he’d be okay with doing a lot more than just talking.

Everything Beth had said earlier popped up in my head. My slut era. How long it’d been, how high school boys were nothing compared to college guys. How more experience usually ended up meaning a better time... and longer.

I couldn’t. Could I?

My mouth moved before I thought up my answer: “We could go in the hall.”

Brandon grinned. He grabbed his drink off the counter and led the way. I threw a glance over my shoulder, spotting Beth still dancing away. We locked eyes for only a few moments, and Beth gave me an overdramatic wink. It made me roll my eyes—or it would’ve, if I then didn’t immediately return all of my focus to Brandon, who I followed out of the apartment.

The party had overflowed even more into the hall. I walked with him down the long hall, keeping up with him even in my heels, though don’t ask me how. We turned into an adjacent hall, fewer people there to crowd us. A small lounge sat near a group of windows, and he claimed a sofa cushion, patting the one beside him as he took another drink.

Now that the music wasn’t in the background, it was just Brandon and me, and I realized we were pretty much alone.

This was definitely a situation I'd never been in before, and I wasn't quite sure how I should handle it.

"So, Taylor," he spoke my name with that cute grin, "how is your Friday night going?"

"Better now," I said, and his smile grew bigger. I think he liked hearing that. "How's yours?"

"I'll let you know."

As he took another sip of his drink, I figured he was flirting. At least, I thought he was flirting with me. I really was an inept fool when it came to the opposite sex. Maybe Beth was right, and it was time to bring out my inner slut. Get some good, old vitamin D—and I didn't mean the sun.

He asked me what I was majoring in, what classes I was taking. After I told him mine, I asked about him. He was majoring in business and minoring in marketing; I had no idea what you could do with something like that.

We talked, we laughed... we inched closer to each other on the sofa. Brandon finished his drink, and he set the cup down on the carpet, putting an arm around my shoulders on the back cushion of the couch. It grew all too easy to stare into the depths of his blue gaze and lose myself in them.

He was funny. He said a lot of funny things. Or maybe I was just primed to laugh a lot. Brandon had a good sense of humor; it made it easy to be comfortable around him.

I didn't know how long we sat there and talked. It felt like hours. And then, after we'd talked for that long, something happened. Brandon shifted the way he sat, so the top half of his body leaned toward me instead of away. I let him pull me in close, and when his gaze fell to my mouth, I might've parted my lips in wait.

Brandon finished closing the distance between us, bringing his mouth to mine. He kissed me tentatively at first, like he wasn't sure it'd be well-received.

Hell, at that point, I'd stopped thinking about what I *should* do and focused on what I *wanted* to do, and what I wanted to do was make out with this guy until my lips got

sore. So that's what I did—I brought a hand to the back of his head and kissed him harder.

It was a little touch and go, mainly because it'd been so long since I'd kissed anyone, but I liked to think I got the hang of it after a little while.

The sound of someone stumbling in the hall was the only reason we parted lips, and we both glanced at the drunk dude mumbling something about needing to make himself some pizza rolls right fucking now. The guy saw us, waved and said hi—though he totally slurred it—and kept shuffling his feet as he walked right on by.

Hmm. This wasn't exactly the most private place.

"I live on the eighth floor," Brandon said, knowing exactly what I was thinking. "We could go there to get more privacy."

Going to his place, though nearby, wasn't something I was comfortable with. "No. Let's go to my place." The words were out of my mouth before I could think to take them back.

What was I doing? Offering to bring a guy back to Creed's place? My heart pounded harder at the thought.

Brandon grinned and nodded. "Sure. Yeah, let's go." He got up, offering me his hand, which I took after I texted Beth that I was finding my own way home tonight.

I didn't miss the messages from Creed, asking—no, *demanding* to know where I'd gone, if I'd made it there safe, blah, blah, blah. Whatever. He'd see I was safe soon enough. Safe and with company.

Brandon didn't have a car, so we had to walk back to Creed's place. I'd be lying if I said I was fine with that. My feet were really starting to hurt, and the added time to get there meant I had more time to wonder if this was a good idea.

But, you know what? I was nineteen years old. If I wanted to hook up with a cute guy I'd met at a party, I'd do it. I was an adult. I could make my own decisions. It was better than hiring someone to sleep with, on the scale of things.

*Cough, cough, Creed.*

As we walked through downtown, we talked a bit more. The more we talked, the more I realized Brandon might be a cute guy, nice enough, but he wasn't all that smart. He brought up some video he saw on TikTok about some conspiracy theory about the moon, and that's when the shiny image I'd built up of him in my head started to crumble and dim a bit.

But, you know what? That was fine. Everyone could believe whatever they wanted. We didn't need to agree on everything just to hook up.

When we arrived at the foot of the tall building Creed lived at, Brandon craned his neck back and asked, incredulous, "You live *here*?"

"Yeah, come on." I pulled him up to the front doors, where a doorman stood. "He's with me," I told the worker, and together, we entered the lobby hand in hand. As I led us to the elevators in the back of the large, grandiose lobby, Brandon kept muttering about how cool it was, how he'd always wondered what the inside of this building was like.

I guess I couldn't blame him; it's exactly how I'd acted the first time I'd walked inside and saw how fancy it was.

We got on the elevator, and the worker recognized me and hit the correct floor for us. As the doors slid closed, Brandon mumbled, "Shit. This place is so fancy. How do you afford it?"

"I live with my brother," I said.

"And he won't mind me there?" Now his excitement to be inside this building was mixed with concern, as if he worried Creed would kick him out or something.

Let him try. Brandon was my guest. I was allowed to have guests over, wasn't I?

I gave Brandon a smile. "It'll be fine." Really, I didn't care how Creed took it. He wasn't my legal guardian. Sure, he was doing me a favor by letting me stay with him, but he wasn't a parent. He couldn't control whether or not I brought someone home.

And if he did... well, I guess I could always spend the night at Brandon's place, even though sleeping at a stranger's place wasn't something I wanted to do. If Creed threw a fit and forced me to make that decision, I'd have to go, just to prove a point.

I was so tired of trying to be the best I could be, so tired of having so much responsibility. I was nineteen. Wasn't this my time to live a little? Wasn't this when I should be having fun and enjoying myself before life threw itself at me, full-force? That's how it was supposed to be, but life always had other plans for me.

But not tonight.

We reached my floor, and I was the first to step out of the elevator, turning to go toward Creed's place. Brandon was behind me, and he kept looking all around, as if even the hallway impressed him. I grabbed the key out of my pocket and slid it into the door, and then I put in the code to unlock the other lock. Within another minute, the door was open and we walked in.

The lights were off, but they didn't stay off for long. I hit the switch for the hall and the kitchen, illuminating the space. All of the switches here had dimmers attached, and I put them on low. My ears heard not another sound in the apartment, not another noise to show that Creed was around.

Huh. Did he go out tonight? He didn't tell me he was going to, but then again, I had told him not to wait up for me. Maybe those missed messages included a change of his plans.

I wasn't going to scroll back and read his messages now to see, though; I had a guest, and there were certain things I wanted to do with my guest... such as take him to the couch and make out with him.

I slipped off my heels as Brandon ventured further into the apartment, his head whipping around. He muttered, "Holy shit. This place is crazy." The awe and incredulousness in his voice nearly made me laugh.

“I know, isn’t it?” I went over to him, grabbed him by the hand, and brought him into the living room, sitting us down on the couch. I didn’t turn on any lights in the room; since the main area of the apartment was open-concept, the dim lights from the kitchen were more than enough to see. Besides, the low lights made a nice atmosphere. The perfect atmosphere for making out with a stranger.

Brandon finally fixated his blue gaze on me. “It doesn’t look like your brother’s home.” His words were accompanied with a slow, sly smile.

“No, it doesn’t look like it,” I replied, leaning into him.

We didn’t say much else, because there was nothing else to say. It was clear what was on my mind, and it was definitely on Brandon’s mind, too; in the next moment, our mouths had found each other’s once more, the kisses more fervent now than they’d been when we were in that lounge. The desire had time to stew and grow, the need for a more bodily release intensified.

Brandon grabbed my waist, bunching up my dress and pulling me over to his lap. I straddled him, and not once did our lips ever break their connection. I wasn’t quite sure what I should do, but I let instinct take over; I started to grind my lower half on his lap.

I must’ve been doing something right, because shortly after I began doing that, Brandon groaned into me, something hard stirring beneath me. My dress had ridden up past my thighs, now resting on my hips, which allowed his hands to find my ass and cup it over my panties.

It felt good, don’t get me wrong. It got my heart pumping and thrill to course through me, but... I didn’t know. Brandon was cute. I found him attractive. Something was missing, though, and I just couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

I pulled my mouth off his, turning my face away as my eyebrows came together. Brandon must’ve thought I wanted him to bring his lips to my neck, because that’s what he did. The hungry kisses on the nape of my neck only tickled me; they didn’t stoke any flames inside me.

Ugh. Wasn't this what I wanted? Wasn't this the whole reason I brought Brandon back here?

As I wondered those questions and more, I heard the sounds of someone unlocking the main door to the apartment. Creed must be coming home. He must've been right behind us.

I turned my head and brought my lips back to Brandon's, kissing him as hard as I could while grinding down on his lap again, moving myself along his bulge. When the door opened, Brandon tried to pull his mouth off me, but I grabbed his face and held him still. He didn't put up much of a fight, letting me take control. I'd be damned if I let Creed dictate who and what I did—I'd gotten enough of that when I lived with my dad.

Honestly, I didn't know what I expected, but it wasn't what happened next.

Within thirty seconds, Creed must've walked over to where we were on the couch, because his voice was close, his words clear and perfectly enunciated, even as he growled them out, "What the fuck, Taylor?"

I certainly didn't think he'd grab me and pull me off Brandon, but that's exactly what he did. He grabbed me by the arms and literally picked me up off his lap, hauling me off Brandon and making me stand on my own two feet beside him.

I pushed him off me, meeting his dark-eyed glare with one of my own. "What the hell, Creed?"

"No," he spoke with a frown, gesturing toward Brandon. "I asked you first. What the fuck? Who the fuck is that and why is he here?" He stared daggers in my direction, giving Brandon time to adjust his hard dick to try to hide his erection.

"That's Brandon, and he's here because I brought him here," I said, yanking down my dress to cover up my exposed lower half. Even though Creed glared at me in a way that told me he wanted me to back down, I refused. I wouldn't. I'd... damn it, I'd stand up for myself, for once.



“Uh...” Brandon’s voice mumbled out an awkward sound. He read the room, Creed’s emotions, and he clearly wanted to leave, because he stood up and wiped his palms along his sides. “I think maybe I should go—” He took one step away from the couch, but he didn’t make it any farther, because Creed was faster.

Creed moved with a purpose, setting a single hand on Brandon’s shoulder and forcing him to sit back down. “Don’t you fucking move,” he hissed out, narrowing his eyes at him. It was only as he stood in front of Brandon that I realized just how much taller he was. With Brandon sitting on the couch, he easily looked like a giant before him.

Brandon’s blue eyes shifted to me, his mouth open, like he wanted to say something to Creed, but he didn’t know how to go about it. Or maybe he was simply nervous because my lovely stepbrother was acting damn near out of his mind.

Creed whirled on me, stepping toward me, his body looming over mine. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him this upset. A part of me—the part that had gotten used to my dad’s flavor of rage—wanted to shrink away, but another part of me, a bigger part, knew Creed wouldn’t hurt me, even if he was downright enraged.

“I told you to tell me where you were going tonight,” Creed growled out, the words spoken so lowly he sounded like an animal. “But you ignored me. You ignored my messages all fucking day so you could play dress up and bring a boy home.” As he said that, his dark gaze fell to my chest—the only part of my dress he could see from where he stood, towering over me.

“I go out looking for you,” he went on, practically baring his teeth at me like a snarling wolf. “And when I come home, I find you and your chosen boy practically fucking on my couch—” Brandon tried to get up again, but Creed turned his head and pointed at him, ordering him, “Don’t you fucking move.”

Brandon held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. “All right, man. All right. I think you should calm down.” Turned out, he shouldn’t have said that, because saying that only

further infuriated Creed, but at least it got his attention off me, as momentary as it would be.

“Calm down?” Creed echoed, frowning at him. “You want me to calm down when you were about to take advantage of my sister? You want me to calm down when your fucking tongue was so far down her throat you were choking her?”

Okay, that was a little extreme—Brandon’s tongue never made it into my mouth. “Creed,” I spoke his name, but that’s all I could get out, because in the next moment, Creed’s hand shot out and grabbed me by the jaw, pulling me in toward him.

“Dude,” Brandon said, getting up. “Don’t fucking touch her.” He tried to get Creed to let me go, tried to posture all alpha-like, but Creed wasn’t having it. While still holding onto my jaw, Creed managed to punch Brandon’s chest, knocking the wind right out of him. He stumbled back, falling onto the couch, wheezing and trying to catch his breath.

“You will sit on that fucking couch until I tell you to get up and go,” Creed growled out, turning his head toward Brandon. “If you try to run, I will catch you—and when I do, I will make you wish you never laid eyes on her tonight.” A threat like that was more of a promise; a promise of violence.

Brandon didn’t say anything. His eyes were wide, but he said not a word. By now, he had to know that he couldn’t outmatch Creed. Creed was taller, stronger, and faster, and he obviously knew how to fight. Creed did work security, so I wasn’t surprised about that.

Creed turned his full attention back to me. I’d lifted a hand to the wrist attached to the fingers curling around my lower jaw. He wasn’t holding onto me tight enough to hurt, but just enough that I couldn’t get out of his grip. Firm and strong but not cruelly so, four fingers curling up my left cheek, his thumb on the other side of my mouth.

“You brought him here to, what?” Creed asked, the top half of his frame slowly bending down to me. “To prove something to me?”

“No, that’s not—” I couldn’t say anything more, mostly because he’d yanked me closer to his body. He was practically on top of me, even though we were standing.

“He is a *boy*,” he growled out that last word in particular, venom dripping off his low, husky voice. “You think he can give you what you need? Do you really think someone like that can make you feel what you want to feel?” He might’ve pointed at Brandon on the couch, but I couldn’t be too sure; I couldn’t take my eyes off Creed.

Or, more specifically, I couldn’t take my eyes off his mouth.

“He is a boy, Taylor.” Creed’s breath was hot on my face, blooming across my skin and warming me up in more places than that. “Let me show you the difference between a boy and a man.”

My lungs constricted on their own; it was like I knew it was coming, but at the same time, I was still shocked when Creed’s hand tightened around my jaw harder and bent my head back. I was still stunned when the top half of his frame bent down and his mouth collided with mine. My eyes remained open for a few seconds, but then they fluttered shut.

Oh.

*Oh.*

The kiss was all fire and urgency, igniting something deep within me all of the kisses with Brandon didn’t. A desperate desire that drowned out every other need and all common sense. Passion devoured me whole, took hold of who I was and refused to let me go. Every single nerve in my body was instantly set aflame, heat rising within me, starting in my lower gut, in a place that had never tingled quite like that before.

His other hand snaked around my lower back, holding me close, the muscles underneath the fabric of the sleeve tightening with the movement. I couldn’t escape him, even if I tried—and I didn’t try. I couldn’t. There wasn’t anything I

could do besides stand there and finally understand what he'd said.

Brandon was a boy. Creed was a man.

Brandon was cute. Creed was drop-dead handsome. The two were incomparable, totally and completely.

“Uh...” Brandon's voice muttered, but he didn't say anything else.

Creed backed me up, moving us so that my backside pressed against the armrest of the couch. He tore his mouth off mine, turning his head to glare at Brandon as he said, “Take notes, boy.”

And then his mouth found mine again, kissing me even harder, stealing the breath out of my lungs and kickstarting my heart in a way nothing ever had before. He still held onto my jaw, almost as if he refused to let it go. Maybe he thought I'd try to pull away or turn away the moment he let me go.

If I was in my right mind, I would. I definitely should.

But I wasn't.

The hand on my lower back went to my side, and in the next moment, I was lifted onto the armrest, my legs straddling either side of it. My dress hiked up as a result, but I didn't care. I was too lost in the unbridled heat and passion of the kiss, too far gone, drowning in a sea I shouldn't even know the taste of.

The hand on my side moved to my exposed thigh, traveling up and eliciting a shiver from me as it went. His hand was rough on my skin, and when his fingers dipped along my inner thigh, any sane thought that might've still resided in my head vanished.

One, two, three, and poof; gone, just like that.

I had to use my own arms to prop myself up on the armrest, to stop myself from falling backward from the sheer assault on my mouth—and it was a good thing I did, because Creed's wandering hand found its destination soon enough, and when it did, a jolt of pleasure seared through me.

His fingers found my panties, rubbing a circle over a tender spot on my body. My clit. It must've been aching for his touch, because when he flicked his thumb over my panties, directly over the swollen nub, I whimpered into the kiss, unable to stop myself.

I couldn't think straight. I couldn't do anything but take whatever Creed was going to give me.

He continued to kiss me, continued to use his fingers on my clit over my panties, and I felt like one big ball of need, like I couldn't get enough. My hips began to rock as much as they could, grinding ever so slightly against his hand.

Creed's fingers eventually moved to the side, and his other hand left my jaw and dropped to my other hip. He worked to get my panties off, sliding them to my knees and leaving them there as he got back to work. One hand rose to grip the back of my head, fingers weaving through my hair, and the other dropped between my thighs.

Now that no underwear sat between him and his destination, everything was amplified tenfold. The moment his fingers dipped low to my entrance, he must've felt my arousal, because he broke the kiss to say, "A real man makes sure his girl wants it just as badly as he does. He makes sure she feels better than she's ever felt in her life." As he said that, his dark gaze locked with mine, and I was unable to look away, even as his fingers returned to my clit, using my own wetness as a sort of lubrication.

*Oh, God.* That was all I could think, along with: *holy shit. This feels so good.*

He was a master of my body, my clit. He knew exactly how to touch me, how to stroke me, to get me to mewl for him, to get me to arch my back and wordlessly beg for more. I felt myself, with each passing second, inching closer and closer to a certain precipice I knew there was no going back from, but I couldn't stop myself.

"A real man," Creed spoke, his voice husky and ragged, "knows exactly how to make his girl come." He twisted his

hand somewhat, his palm putting pressure on my clit as a finger slipped inside of me.

I inhaled sharply, my dress suddenly feeling too stifling. My hips rocked with the rhythm set by his hand, grinding my clit against his hand as his finger began to pump in and out of me.

I must've been on the brink that whole time, because it didn't take long for me to lose it. A pressure began to build in my lower half, and before I knew what was happening, pleasure exploded within me, a surge of carnal bliss I couldn't fight. My muscles spasmed uncontrollably, a cry leaving my lips at the same time. The orgasm took hold of me, choked me, and took its time in leaving after it was done.

I didn't think the word *fuck* adequately described what I was thinking or how I felt in that moment. No word could.

## Chapter Ten – Creed

This was bad. This was very, very, very bad, and yet I couldn't stop myself. Something in me snapped when I came in and saw her on the couch, on top of some random boy.

A boy—because that's what he was: nothing but a worthless boy who'd never give Taylor what she deserved. That girl deserved to be worshiped, to be treated like a goddess, which was precisely what she was.

I made my point. I was just going to kiss her, but then, after tasting her lips on mine, I knew I needed more. I couldn't stop with a kiss. I needed to know what she sounded like when she unraveled for me.

And she was beautiful. The sounds she made were sexy as hell, and the way her hips rocked along with my hand made my cock twitch with a different kind of need. Oh, I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and bring her to my bedroom, shut the door and lock out the world while I got to know every inch of her body intimately.

She was mine. She didn't know it yet, but she was mine. She had to be.

But... she shouldn't be. Taylor shouldn't belong to me; that much I knew. Not only were we stepsiblings, but I'd abandoned her ten years ago, left her with her abusive douchebag of a father; I didn't deserve her. But that was something I could wrestle with on my own time. For now... I still had a captive audience.

I was slow to pull my finger out of her pussy, even slower to turn my head and glare at the boy on the couch. Just thinking of him being with Taylor, of his dick burying itself between her sweet thighs, made me unreasonably upset, to the point where I could hardly think straight. I supposed that was how we'd gotten into this position to begin with: Taylor

straddling the armrest of the couch, her dressed bunched up to her waist, panties near her knees.

Every so often, while I was making my point, I'd tossed a glance to the boy. He'd watched. He'd been horrified, at first, thinking we were actually brother and sister, but eventually the horror he'd felt had been replaced by something else. Taylor had aroused him, made his cock hard, before I'd walked in.

Fuck. I didn't know what the hell I would've done if I would've walked in and seen them fucking. The thought enraged me to no end. As much as I shouldn't want to claim this girl, I did. I wanted to make her mine in every way possible. I think I'd known it from that first night she came back into my life.

I didn't move away from Taylor. My hands curled around her hips, and I held onto her as I growled out, "Get the fuck out of here, boy." Hatred swelled within me as I watched him get to his feet, his cock still hard. He wouldn't be fucking Taylor tonight—or ever.

He was slow to move around the couch, never breaking eye contact with me. He did rub his chest where I'd punched him, as if it still hurt—which it probably did. I could throw a mean punch when I was pissed, and I was more pissed now than I'd ever been in my entire fucking life.

The boy picked up his pace once he was ten feet away on the other side of the couch, and he practically sprinted to the door to get out.

Once the door swung shut behind him and Taylor and I were alone, I moved my gaze back to her, finding those big, green eyes staring up at me. Her lips were swollen and redder than normal, parted as she panted.

"You..." Taylor was breathless, and the way she stared up at me told me exactly how much she'd enjoyed that, even if she wasn't ready to admit it out loud. I... I didn't think I was ready, either. She gathered her wits, set both hands on my chest, and pushed me back.



I let her do it, even if the last thing I wanted to do was let her go.

She got to her feet, pulling up her panties and fixing her dress, and the next time she looked at me, her expression had hardened into a glare. “What the hell is wrong with you? What—what’s *wrong* with you? I mean, what the hell?” She was having trouble speaking.

I cocked my head at her. “I could ask you the same thing, Taylor.”

She shook her head, her brown hair straightened. I had to admit, in that black dress, she looked downright gorgeous, sexier than she had any right to be. She said nothing to me, turning on her bare feet and hurrying down the hall, going to her room.

But we weren’t done with the conversation yet, so I followed her. She’d turned on the lights, and before she could shut her door and lock me out, I stopped it with a foot and an arm.

“No,” Taylor said, still trying to shut the door even though my body was in the way. She wasn’t strong enough to force me out; she knew that, and yet she still struggled in vain. “Get out of my room, Creed.”

“No,” I told her, responding to her still trying to shut the door by walking in. “Who the fuck was that guy? How do you know him?” Even now, even after making my point to them both, the mere thought of that boy touching her like that riled me up like nothing else ever had.

Taylor rolled her eyes and gave me her back, moving to the windows on the far side of the room. She crossed her arms as she gazed outside, at the world of night. “I don’t know him. I met him tonight—” That was the wrong thing to say to me, and she knew it, because right after that, she shut up.

“You brought a *stranger* here? You were going to fuck someone you just met?” My chest rose and fell with indignation, and I was measured in crossing the length of the room and walking over to her. My hands flexed at my sides.

Everything in me screamed for me to take her in my grip again and teach her another lesson about the difference between boys and men.

She whirled around, dropping her hands to her hips, standing in defiance. “Yeah, so what? I’m allowed to fuck whoever I want, Creed. You don’t get to tell me what to do. You’re not—you’re my stepbrother. You shouldn’t have done that! It’s none of your business who I want to fuck!”

“But it is. It became my business the day you came to me.” I stopped when I stood a foot in front of her. Everything in me was still worked up from our kiss, from feeling her body react to mine, how easily I’d brought her to an orgasm. I bet I could make her lose it again, even quicker this time. “Everything about you is my business.”

“Fuck you,” she whispered, though there was less defiance behind that sentence than her previous ones. “Fuck you for being such an asshole.”

“I’m an asshole? I was only trying to prove a point.”

“And what was your point?”

I stared at her, taking another step forward. She backed up until her spine hit the glass wall of windows and she had nowhere else to go. I set both my arms on the glass beside her head, boxing her in, and I leaned over her, slow in letting my bottom half pin her against the glass. She really did fit so well against me, it was unreal.

“He’s not what you need,” I whispered, my voice so low it was hard to hear.

She swallowed under the intensity radiating off me, but she had a comeback ready, “You seem to know all about me, so why don’t you tell me what it is you think I need.” She already knew; she just wanted to hear me say it.

The arms I had on the glass on either side of her head were sluggish in falling, so that my hands were now inches away from her head. “You need a man, Taylor. Someone who can keep you safe.” *Someone who won’t take boys like that sniffing*

*around with a grain of salt*; but I kept that part to myself, knowing she wouldn't like it.

"You're my stepbrother," she reminded us both. "You can't be that for me."

Was I still her stepbrother, even though my mom had died and I'd left her all those years ago? We were family in that way... or were we something else now? She'd grown up knowing me, trusting me, at times following me around the house like a puppy, showering me with unconditional love at every turn.

And then I'd left.

I wanted... fuck. What I wanted was complicated as hell.

My head dipped down, my forehead leaning on the glass above her head. She'd tilted her head back to gaze up at me, waiting to hear my response to that. "I want to be your brother," I told her, meaning it. "I want to be your protector. I want to keep you safe from the horrors of the world and all the shit it can throw at you."

My right hand dropped from the glass, moving to cup her face, her cheek. She didn't try to push me away then, and as she gazed up at me, her anger at me was all but forgotten, along with mine at her for daring to bring that boy here.

"I want to be that person for you," I went on. "But I want to be more than that." The thumb on her cheek dropped to the corner of her mouth. It pained me to know how soft her lips were, how they felt when they were on mine. That mouth was addicting.

"You're... we can't. You can't say those things to me. You can't do those things. You can't act like—" She turned her face away from me, ducking and slipping out of our position, starting to walk away.

My hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to me, colliding her chest against me. "Why not?" I demanded, staring down into those pretty green orbs. "Why can't we? Why can't I make up for the last ten years?"

“If you wouldn’t have left, we wouldn’t be in this situation,” she pointed out, but still I wouldn’t release her wrist and let her go. My other arm had curled around her back, holding her to me. “You’d be a brother to me. You still are—”

“Liar.”

“It’s not a lie. It’s true.”

“No, it’s not.” The hand I had on her wrist dropped it finally, but it rose to tangle in her hair. I pulled on her hair with a jerk of my hand, tugging her head back and eliciting a sharp gasp from her. “You kissed me back. Your body begged for mine. You whimpered for me, you came on my fingers. Do not lie to me and say I’m just a brother to you now.”

Even though her eyes were half-lidded and her lips had parted the moment I’d pulled her hair, Taylor still managed to say, “You are.”

“Liar,” I whispered back, lowering my head to hers.

“You’re my brother.”

“Stop lying to me. Stop lying to us both.”

“You. Are. My. Brother.” She whispered each word on its own, attempting to sound vehement in her denial of me, of what just happened, of how her body had responded to mine. “Nothing more.”

I didn’t know who she was trying to convince: herself or me. Either way, it didn’t matter, because I wasn’t having any of it. Not right now. Not after feeling her body squirm against mine. Maybe it was the adrenaline rushing through my system, or maybe it was due to some momentary lapse I’d come to regret in the morning, but seeing her with someone else had made something in me snap.

Snap. Crack in half. Unleash the animal inside. However you wanted to describe it, it didn’t matter. The truth of the matter was, when I gazed upon this girl, this sweet, defiant, beautiful girl, all I thought was: *mine*.

Taylor breathed unsteadily as she gazed up at me, something other than defiance residing within those green

depths. Lust, desire, the need to throw all caution to the wind and give in to what she surely had to feel... but in the end, she managed to whisper, "Let me go, Creed." A plea for me to stop, to let her go, to end this—whatever this was.

I didn't want to. I sure as hell didn't want to release my hold on her and let her go, pretend as if none of this had happened. I was too far gone, too far past the point of no return. Taylor might struggle to return to some normalcy around here, but I didn't know that I ever could. Things had changed for me tonight.

I met her stare with my own, trying in vain to get my breathing under control. Heavy, ragged breaths left me, my lungs working hard, as if I'd just been on the hunt. I had thoughts of pushing her to the bed, bending her over the edge and lifting that dress to expose her lower half to me. The things I'd do to her, the sounds I'd pull from her as she came undone on something other than my fingers...

Fuck.

It took everything in me to let her go. Absolutely everything. Every last ounce of restraint I'd built up. Letting go of her and stepping away from her was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do in my life—and that included any of the jobs I'd taken these last ten years.

Killing was nothing compared to resisting Taylor.

Though I'd taken a step back, though I'd released her, neither one of us moved beyond that. We stood there, for at least a minute more, staring at each other. Neither of us said a single word; I think everything we could've said in that moment was spoken with the expressions on our faces.

I didn't want to leave her room, but I wasn't the kind of man who could ever force himself onto someone else. It wasn't who I was, not who I wanted to be for her. No. Something might've changed for me tonight, but I had to be patient. I had to let her see the light on her own.

As I stared at her, I knew: she'd come to me. She would come to me sooner or later, and when she did, it would be

biblical.

So, in the end, I gathered myself and left her bedroom, not saying a single word more. I grabbed her door on my way out and shut it, giving her privacy. As I walked to my bedroom, I ran a hand down my face, my palm running against my stubble, and I let out a harsh sigh. I went to sit on the edge of my bed, leaning forward as I set my forearms on my knees, letting tonight's events play on repeat in my mind.

A better man wouldn't have reacted like that. A good man would've let them be, if that's what Taylor had truly wanted to do.

But that's the thing, I guess. I wasn't a good man. I wasn't raised to be a decent member of society. I'd been trained my whole life to take over when the time came, to become the Black Wolf; it's why I'd left the life with Taylor behind. I was a hired mercenary, a criminal in my own right. A killer, a hitman, an assassin. Most members of the Guild were.

My hands clenched and unclenched as I sought to lessen the urges inside me. All night—and pretty much all day—Taylor had worked me up by refusing to answer my texts, by not telling me where she'd go tonight. To think, I'd gone out in search of her, just to make sure she didn't end up in an alley somewhere, dead.

How quickly things had changed the second I'd seen her back here.

Would she hate me tomorrow? Would she decide she wasn't comfortable living here, with me, after that outburst of mine? Or perhaps she'd pretend none of this had happened, and she'd try to go on as if I was nothing but the brother she told me I was?

Taylor was no child anymore, following me around the house with puppy dog eyes. I was no kid either; the world had shown me what darkness lay within it, and I had become a part of that same darkness, adding my own flavor to it.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring, or next week, for that matter. I knew one thing was for sure, though: I had to

get out of this house and give Taylor space, let her come to the only conclusion she could on her own time.

What was the conclusion?

She and I... we were meant to be. Fate had brought us together once more, and I'd be damned if I let her slip out of my life again.

## Chapter Eleven – Taylor

“Taylor!” Beth found me walking on the sidewalk between classes on Monday. She’d brought my bag with her, and she handed it to me. “You didn’t answer me all weekend, girl. I was kinda worried about you. How did it go with that guy?” She had a bag slung over her shoulder, and she adjusted it as she matched my pace.

“Um, fine,” I managed to say, swallowing hard as I remembered what Creed had done when he’d walked in on us. I ran my tongue over my lower lip, my cheeks blushing even though I mentally chided myself for it.

I shouldn’t be thinking of that night. Days had passed since then, and Creed had said not a single word to me, back to his cold shoulder routine. And, to top it all off, he was gone, out of town for a while on a job, which left me alone in his place.

That was so many different kinds of wrong. He was my brother. Stepbrother, but still a brother. I’d grown up idolizing him. I loved him the way you should love a brother.

But... but it’d been ten years. Neither of us were the same as we were then. We’d both grown, become different people. Just because I was old enough now to realize how attractive of a man he was shouldn’t mean anything.

“Fine?” Beth echoed. “What do you mean *fine*? If it was just fine, then it wasn’t good at all.” She let out a sigh, as if she was saddened on my behalf, for the lack of fantastic hook up sex.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... I brought him home,” I told her, slowing my walk to a halt. I stepped off to the side; since it was between classes, the sidewalks were pretty full of other students. “I live with my brother.”

“I thought you said you lived with your dad?”



“I did—but something happened, and I had to move in with my brother.” As I said it, I hoped Beth wouldn’t ask a bunch of questions about it. Honestly, it was one reason why I liked her so much; she never felt the need to prod when it came to details about my life. “But, um, let’s just say it didn’t go well.”

Beth blinked. “Oh, God. What happened?” It seemed she wanted to get to the bottom of this story of mine, and I figured I might as well tell her—not all of it, but a lot of it. The main gist, anyway.

I was not going to tell her that Creed had kissed me in a way that made me forget about the world, and I was definitely not going to tell her that he’d done a little finger-fucking and that an orgasm was involved.

Nope. Those particular details would die with me.

“My brother kind of freaked. He...” It was as if the ghostly sensation of his kiss remained, and I fought internally to push it off. “He kicked him out. My brother was pissed.” Pissed was an understatement, though. Creed had been... so much more than that.

The way he’d looked at me, like I was the only thing that existed. The way he’d touched me, like he knew exactly how to make me feel good. The things he’d said, the words he’d uttered in such urgency that I damn near almost gave in to him.

But I didn’t. Just barely, I’d managed to keep hold of my sanity intact.

Honestly, for a moment there, I’d worried Creed would refuse to leave my bedroom, that he’d take things to the next level. If he’d tried... I didn’t know if I would’ve had the strength to tell him no again.

And I didn’t mean the physical kind of strength; I meant the mental fortitude, the inner willpower to resist. If I physically pushed him off me, if I yelled at him to stop, he’d stop. I knew that in my soul. If we would’ve crossed that line,

I didn't know where that would leave us, if things would get too weird and I'd be forced to move back in with my dad.

I did *not* want to go back there.

"Shit," Beth muttered, frowning somewhat. In a typical Monday fashion, her black hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head, but a few stray strands had escaped, and the wind tousled them around. "I guess from now on, you go to the guy's place."

I started walking again, and Beth walked with me. "I don't know if I'm comfortable with that. I think... I think it's just better if I avoid any more parties."

"Oh, come on! You were having fun! Plus, you looked so good—"

"Crap," I cut in. "I forgot to bring your dress and your heels. I can bring them tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Bring them whenever. Your clothes are still on the floor of my dorm room, so I'm in no rush." She laughed. "Besides, you looked amazing in that dress. It fit you so much better than it fit me."

I didn't know about that, but I guessed I'd take the compliment and shut up about it.

Beth and I had to part ways after that, head to separate classes. Mine was in a big lecture hall with a professor who liked to walk up and down the stairs as he taught. It was his way of making sure any laptops were actually being used for note-taking and not, you know, games or porn.

Yeah. Let's just say if you sat in the back, you could usually get away with a lot. College boys were just as horny as high school boys. I'd seen some things on screens I'd had to pass to go the bathroom that I'd rather not repeat.

But, anyway, it was hard for me to focus on anything. My mind was a mess. Try to pay attention as I might, no matter how hard I tried to, in the end my mind always went back to Friday night.

The way Creed had looked at me, with a possessive hunger in his dark stare. The way his voice had gotten a little rougher, his deep tone husky and breathless. The feeling of his mouth on mine, dominant and claiming... it was enough to make my heart skip a beat and my thighs squeeze together even now.

God. What was wrong with me? I shouldn't be thinking of any of that. Hell, I should be grossed out and disgusted by it, right?

I mean, yeah, we weren't related by blood, so there wasn't that aspect to overcome, but still... I'd grown up with him. I'd viewed him as a brother, not a stepbrother. It was wrong to feel this way for someone like that.

The day passed slowly, the minutes crawling by more like hours than anything else. I was anxious to return to the apartment, because what would I do if Creed was back? Would we continue on as if nothing had happened Friday night, or would things only get more complicated between us? God, I didn't know what to do.

But, as it turned out, all of my worrying was for nothing, because Creed wasn't back. The apartment was just as empty as it had been earlier, leaving me to my own devices yet again.

It wasn't that I wasn't used to being alone; I'd grown up pretty much alone, dreading any time Dad came home, but this was a different sort of alone. This was a loneliness I could feel deep within my bones, almost as if it hurt my heart.

I did some homework, started another paper. When dinner time rolled around, I wasn't very hungry, so I didn't eat much. A little snack, but that's it. Nothing huge. No real meals. I... I think this whole thing bothered me more than I wanted to admit to myself, mainly because I didn't want Creed to return and act like nothing had happened between us.

I hated this. I hated that I wanted more. I *shouldn't* want more.

I showered and went to bed early that night, and before sleep took me, a memory flashed in my head: I was seven or

eight years old, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, the kind of kid who couldn't wait to grow up and have the world at my fingertips. Naive through and through, but that's the thing about being a child—eventually the reality of growing up shattered that naivety.

But, anyway, I was a young girl, told by my stepmom to get my brother and bring him out of his room for dinner. I'd skipped up the steps, seconds from barging into Creed's room. The door sat open a few inches, allowing me to see inside just a hair, and what I saw was Creed, shirtless, standing in the middle of the room while he practiced some sort of routine.

At the time, I hadn't realized just how muscular he was for a teenager, nor had I realized that he was practicing his technique for attacking someone else. Now that I was older and thinking about it, I knew what it was, but then... I'd been nothing more than a child full of awe.

I'd pushed into his room, my mouth falling open as he sidestepped an imaginary person, doing something fancy with his feet that I didn't understand. Creed had seen me, seen the look on my face, and all he did was smirk.

"What are you doing?" I'd asked, temporarily forgetting the reason I'd been sent there to get him in the first place.

"Practicing" was all he'd said, and he stopped after that, going to get his shirt from his bed and slipping it on. "What do you want, kid?" At that, he'd grinned; he knew calling me a kid always made me upset.

It made me upset because I wanted to be like him.

"Mom said dinner's done," I'd rattled off, still amazed at what I'd seen him do. "Can you teach me to do that?"

Creed had stopped when he'd stood before me, and he was slow to kneel down in front of me, his dark eyes playful. "Teach you what?" He flicked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to where he'd been moments ago. "That? Taylor, you don't need to know how to do any of that. You have me. I'll protect you. Always." His voice had changed then, softening up, and he sounded like he really meant it.

“But it looked cool.”

That had gotten him to laugh as he stood and straightened himself out. He towered over me even more back then, but he did offer me his hand. “Maybe once you’re older, I’ll teach you a little bit. Come on,” he’d said. “Let’s get down there before Mom gets mad dinner’s getting cold.”

I’d slipped my small hand into his, letting him lead me out, too happy that he’d agreed to teach me some of the cool moves when I got older.

But... but older never came. At least, not with us together, because not too long after that, his mom died, and he left. Creed never did teach me any of that, and now it was far too late. I could’ve used some of those moves to keep myself safe these last ten years, to keep my dad at bay when he was really drunk.

In the darkness of the night, I reached up to my neck, the skin there faintly burning with the memory of being choked.

I rolled onto my side, hugging my pillow. Was Creed’s mom in security, too? She must’ve been. It had to be a family business—and that fact only made it hurt worse. Creed had abandoned me, left me with Dad, all to come downtown, not even an hour away, and pretend I didn’t exist these last ten years, all to join the family business?

And then he had the gall to act like he’d acted Friday night, when I was only trying to live a little.

Okay, live a little and annoy him like Hailee had annoyed me, but still.

Ugh, I didn’t want to think about Creed right now, and I sure as hell didn’t want to think about what he did Friday night. People pretended things didn’t happen all the time, and yet I didn’t know if I’d be able to. How could we go on? How could we return to the place we were before Friday night rolled around and Creed kissed me and touched me like that?

Like he owned me. Like he could devour me whole and never spit me out.

Needless to say, I did a whole lot more thinking that night, and I hardly got any sleep. I wished I could say it was out of the ordinary, but I didn't think I'd gotten any solid nights of sleep since Friday.

Time wore on.

After classes the next day, I decided not to go straight back to Creed's place, instead walking to the Hooting Owl. Still a strange name for a bar if I ever heard one, but I guess it was so unique it buried itself in your mind and you weren't likely to forget it.

I decided to go there because the apartment was empty, and being in it by myself made me think too much. I could've gone to Beth's dorm, but I didn't want to do that, either. No. I... I didn't know what to do, frankly, didn't know what I could possibly do to set my mind at ease.

So, at around three o'clock in the afternoon, I strolled through the front door to the Hooting Owl. The place looked just as I remembered it from that first night, although there were fewer people. When night fell, I was sure this place was hopping with people wanting to spend their hard-earned cash on some expensive booze.

Personally, I didn't get the appeal, but all the power to them.

One older guy sat in the far booth in the back of the place, while another pair were playing pool while swigging beer from their glass bottles. I saw that the same guy was working behind the counter—Jeff, I thought his name was—so I headed there.

Jeff was currently wiping something down on the counter as I strolled up. His brown hair slicked back, the same as it had been the other night. He wore a white t-shirt along with a golden chain around his neck, and when his eyes spotted me, he broke out into a smile beneath his goatee.

"Well, hey there, Creed's little sister," Jeff spoke, grinning all the while. He stopped wiping the counter and came over to

me, leaning on the opposite side.

“It’s Taylor,” I told him, slipping onto one of the stools.

Jeff watched me carefully set my bag full of textbooks onto the stool beside me, waiting a moment to say, “Taylor. I like it. What can I do for you today, Miss Taylor?” I couldn’t tell whether he was being genuinely nice to me in calling me Miss Taylor, or if he was doing it to be funny or something. I didn’t know him enough to differentiate it, yet.

I shrugged.

He bent down and plucked a clean glass from beneath the counter. “It was a coke and grenadine, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, reaching into my pocket to get out the card Creed had given me to pay for it—he’d never told me it was just for emergencies, but I liked to think I could splurge every now and then. It wasn’t like I was going out and spending a thousand dollars on myself each day. Going shopping for clothes and a new laptop had been enough.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jeff said, noticing the card. He started mixing the drink.

“Doesn’t a bar stay in business by charging everyone?”

That got him to chuckle. He said not a word as he finished up the drink and placed it directly before me. “You got me there, but charging Creed’s little sister ain’t on my list of things to do.” He leaned against the counter, pausing before he added, “Not sure what all he’s told you, but he’s a bit of legend around here.”

“Is he?”

Jeff nodded once, totally serious as he explained, “Oh, yeah. Everyone around here knows him.”

“He hasn’t told me much of anything,” I admitted. “All I know is that he works security... and he seems to be doing quite well for himself.” That was the understatement of the year, I think, but I didn’t want to brag about Creed to Jeff. If Jeff knew him, then he had to know just how loaded my stepbrother was.

Hmm. Felt weird calling him that now, even in my head, but maybe if I repeated it enough times, it'd start to ring true again and I'd forget the taste of his lips on mine.

“Security,” Jeff repeated, a strange expression crossing his face—but only for a moment. “Yeah, a lot of people who work at the security firm come here. I never ask for details, but I can't complain. They keep the business running.”

Huh. So the Hooting Owl was where a lot of Creed's coworkers came when they wanted to spend a little money and get drunk? I couldn't picture him doing that, though. Creed seemed like a solitary man.

“I take it it's not a local business,” I spoke, slow to grab the drink before me. “Or do they just have clients all over the place?”

“Oh, they go all over,” Jeff said. “Wherever the business is.”

“I imagine jobs can take a while.”

“I imagine so.”

I took a sip out of the drink. It was sweeter than the one he'd made the first night, or maybe it was only because I wasn't sitting here, full of anticipation, waiting for Creed to show up... waiting to see him for the first time in ten years.

I bit my lower lip, slow to ask, “Are they dangerous, the jobs?” I didn't know why I was asking Jeff; he worked here, not with Creed. Right now, though, Jeff was the only person I knew who had an ounce of knowledge about the subject.

Jeff made an awkward sound, and then he threw a look around the bar. He leaned forward, his voice much lower than it had been before, as if he wasn't supposed to tell me any of this, “I don't want to lie to you. Yeah, some of them are, but from what I hear, your brother's one of the best out there. He can take care of himself, and then some. That dude could take on an army single-handedly and win.”

Now that just sounded ridiculous, and I rolled my eyes as I listened to him say it.



He laughed. "I mean it. Your brother's good at what he does. I wouldn't worry about him."

"What happens if he doesn't come back from a job?" What would happen to me then? Who would do his funeral? Would there even be a funeral? So many questions sprang up in my head, things I'd never before worried about.

"He always comes back," Jeff said. "He'll come back, Taylor."

I kept quiet after that, too caught up in my own thoughts to continue the conversation. Jeff, however, asked, "Now, why don't you tell me about yourself? I've been dying to know what Creed's little sister is like, ever since you first walked into this bar." He smiled at me, flashing a set of pearly whites.

He was an attractive man, in his own way. Tall, but not taller than Creed. More muscular than your average man, I think. Maybe a few years older than Creed.

But he did nothing for me. When he smiled at me, my stomach didn't do a somersault inside. When those eyes of his met and held my stare, my palms didn't get clammy. In fact, all I could think about was Creed.

Even though I didn't really want to talk, I told Jeff a little about me. Where I was going to school, what I was majoring in. Maybe he only paid attention to me because I was the only one sitting at the counter, but I had to admit it was kind of nice to talk to someone else, someone who wasn't Beth or Creed. A new face with no expectations whatsoever... and no confusing kiss lingering in the back of my memory.

The bar got busier around five, and that's when Jeff got too busy to talk to me, so I left. Figured I'd better get back to the apartment before it got dark, anyway.

I made myself a quick dinner in the microwave and watched TV. After I showered, I did a little homework. I wished I could say I didn't check my phone religiously, but I did. A part of me was waiting to hear from Creed, for him to tell me he was safe.

At five past nine, I typed out a message to him, telling him I hoped everything was okay—but then I deleted it and flipped my phone over, screen down, and slid it farther away from me so it wasn't within reach.

Time crawled on, and eventually I went to bed, but it would seem my head had other ideas. Read: a dream I definitely shouldn't have had...

*Creed was back, but I couldn't remember when he got back. In fact, I was swinging on the swing set in the backyard when I saw him walk down the few old wooden steps to get to the grass. The sun was bright overhead, but the air wasn't hot. I couldn't even feel the wind on my face from swinging.*

*But I stopped swinging when I saw him, and I got up, standing on my own two feet—barefoot, for whatever reason. I couldn't feel the grass below my soles, but none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was the man heading straight for me.*

*And, God, did he look good. Wearing a pitch-black suit with an equally dark undershirt, Creed looked drop-dead gorgeous. Seriously, I didn't think I'd ever seen a man wear a suit like that. Like candy. Like sex on two legs.*

*Wait, I wasn't supposed to think of him like that.*

*"Creed," I spoke his name. "What are you—"*

*"I've been looking everywhere for you," he said, stopping only when he stood directly before me, his hands sweeping up into my hair and pulling my head back, forcing me to gaze into those dark irises of his.*

*Something in me twisted, but not in a bad way. It was like the deepest parts of me had yearned to hear him say that. For whatever reason, it felt as though I hadn't seen him in ages. I opened my mouth to say that I'd missed him—because I had, more than anything—but then he did something else.*

*He kissed me.*

*He bent his head down and brought his lips to mine, stealing away whatever breath was left in my lungs and all the*

*words I might've said. He kissed me like he'd gone his whole life waiting for this exact moment. Everything led up to this.*

*My eyes were open, at first, and I was so shocked at the kiss, but then... then something changed. Then I kissed him back, and the whole world faded away around us. I leaned into him, put my all into the kiss. My heartbeat kickstarted, beating faster and faster until...*

Well, until I woke up in a sweaty daze, staring up at the dark ceiling.

Needless to say, I yelled at myself a lot in my head after that, and I never fell back asleep. I just couldn't turn my mind off. Everything in me seemed to scream for Creed, and no matter how much I wrestled with myself over it, regardless of how I tried to convince myself otherwise, the feeling only grew stronger.

God. I had the feeling what happened last Friday night was only the beginning.

## Chapter Twelve – Creed

I purposefully took my time on the job because I didn't want to rush home. Taylor was fine; I would've been alerted if something had happened. It was unusual for me; typically I accepted a job, left straightaway for it, and completed it with remarkably fast efficiency. I was good at what I did, and I liked to think I inherited some of my skill from my mom.

But even skill couldn't save you all the time. Sometimes your targets fought back. Sometimes they managed to deal a fatal blow to you in the midst of completion. Of course, that really all depended on the job and how the client wanted it done. Some didn't care, so a bullet from a silent gun would suffice. Others wanted their targets to suffer, and as such chose close-up, hand-to-hand ends.

If you wanted safe employment, you didn't work for the Guild; that went without saying.

I took my time in following my target, learning their daily mannerisms, where they got coffee each morning before work, where they went to lunch, how many minutes after five they worked each day. Hint: between two and three. My target was pretty timely when it came to clocking out for the day.

Damn near a week passed, mostly because I let it. Because, once I was finished and the body was disposed of, I'd have to go back. Go back and face what I'd done. I could only ignore my actions for so long; sooner or later I'd have to face them, and I feared there was no going back now.

And it was all because I couldn't stop myself that night, because I couldn't stand back and let Taylor throw herself at some random guy. I'd seen enough of them on the couch to know exactly what she'd wanted, and the thought of her hooking up with some random asshole filled me with righteous anger.

I'd decided that night I wouldn't let her, and I made the decision for her. She hadn't liked it, and if I knew Taylor, I'd say she probably still stewed over it—another reason why we each needed our space. We were alike in that way.

Thursday night I made my move on the target. I broke into their house after checking to make sure they didn't have any cameras set up on the doorbell and near the garage. Home security didn't make it impossible to break in without being seen... it just made it harder. Harder was not impossible, though.

The target lived in a bigger than average house, but he lived alone. I'd bet anything if he had a family, he would've had better home security. As it was, he worked a decent job and made enough to pay his bills... and apparently piss someone else off in the process, someone with a lot of money.

And if there was one thing about money, it was this: it could make everything disappear. It could do anything. Every single person in this world could be bought, you just had to find the right amount.

It was why the Guild existed; our clients were usually the wealthy sort, the kind who took personal affront to snubs. They were the type of people who never wanted to dirty their hands themselves, so we got dirty for them.

We stole for them. We lied for them. We killed for them and we cleaned up the messes. We were contract killers, mercenaries, men and women who devoted their lives to the Guild and everything it stood for.

One good thing about working for the Guild was the early retirement. One bad thing was, sometimes that retirement wasn't planned, and it came with your death. Such as it had been for my mom.

I tried not thinking about it, because when I did, I got angry. To the outside world, it had been nothing more than an accident—a car crash that had left her dead. To the Guild and to me, on the other hand...

Let's just say when you were about to complete a contract, you made sure to sweep the premises. Sometimes mistakes were made, sometimes there were other people around you didn't notice, and when they made themselves known to you, you slipped up, and your target managed to gain ground. Sometimes they managed to take your weapon from you and beat you with it, over and over again until you were a bloody pulp.

I hadn't seen her, afterward. The Lioness wouldn't let me. She had a closed-casket funeral.

But, enough of the past. Back to the present, where I waited for my target in his bedroom. Black leather gloves sat on my hands, their length just enough to fit snugly over my wrists. I stood near the window, my back against the wall just beside it. I wore all black, blending into the shadows of the bedroom, and I held onto a small pistol, a custom silencer screwed onto the front end of the barrel.

Guns were my preferred method, but sometimes I had to get up close and personal with them. I gave them only what they deserved.

I didn't take every single job I could, you see. I was very particular about those that I accepted; I didn't kill just to kill. That was what differentiated me from my mom. My mom could separate herself from the job, but I couldn't. I was a weapon in the form of a man, and because of that, I only took the jobs that I deemed worthy.

The ones where the target had more than earned their death. The ones where they, again, deserved every ounce of pain they got. The jobs I took typically required more than death.

Take this guy, for instance. On the outside, he might look like your typical white-collar worker, someone who owned a nice house and newer car, someone who had his shit together, but he had a past. A year ago he put his girlfriend in the hospital; pushed her down the stairs. She survived, but she couldn't walk anymore. It just so happened that her family had

some connections. They came to the Guild, and they'd saved up to have their villain erased from the world.

That's where I came in.

A creed was a system of beliefs, something you lived by each and every day. They helped to guide your actions, putting you on the path you should take in life. With my name, it was only fitting that I had a creed of my own. It was simple, too—a common one, one most people had heard of at some point in their lives.

*Do unto others as you would have done unto you.*

My ears heard my target walking up the steps, muttering to himself about something. I waited until he walked into the bedroom before aiming my gun. The fool didn't even look at me; he didn't flick the light on as he loosened his tie in the darkness. He went to his dresser, yanking out a drawer and searching through it.

The man couldn't find what he was looking for, so he muttered an annoyed, "God damn it," and went to the light switch near the door. When the light flickered on, that's when he finally realized he wasn't alone.

I'd drawn the blinds over the window behind me, having done the same to each and every window of the house while I waited for him to come home. Just in case someone happened to be outside and was able to see in.

"What the..." He stopped when he noticed the gun I held onto, eyes widening when he realized it was pointed at him. He lifted both hands in a surrendering gesture. "Whatever you want, just take it."

The idiot thought I was a thief, a robber, here to rid him of some of his worldly possessions. Did I look like a burglar? Did I look like someone who lived in a run-down shack, who spent all day, every day, planning my next heist? Please.

I didn't blink as I aimed the gun a little lower, shooting twice. The pistol was damn near silent as the bullets popped off, and they hit their destinations quite nicely. One in the left, one in the right, shattering on impact. I shot him in his knees.

“Fuck!” The man fell forward to the floor, his knees now unable to keep him up. He curled into the fetal position, rolling onto his back as he tried to clutch his knees and staunch the bleeding.

It was too late, though. The kneecaps were as good as gone. If he lived to see another day, he wouldn't be able to walk without crutches and a hell of a lot of surgery. Knee replacements, definitely.

But he wasn't going to live to see another day.

I walked over to him, unimpressed by his swear words and his glares. He reached into his pocket to pull out his phone, but I stepped on his wrist and made him let the phone go. Once it was on the floor, I kicked it away from him.

“What the fuck, man?” He sounded like he was drowning in pain. Good. “I told you you could take whatever. What the fuck is wrong with you? What—” He stopped blubbing when he saw my expression read unimpressed. Maybe, finally, he was starting to realize I wasn't a simple robber, here to take whatever he had stored in this house. “Who are you?” He'd started to grow pale, probably from the pain.

The blood coming from his knees didn't faze me. I held his stare, slow to kneel down beside him. “I have many names,” I told him in a whisper. “Some call me death, but you... you can call me karma. I've come to collect a debt you owe... and I'm afraid there's interest as well.”

Those eyes of his widened even more. “I don't owe anyone. I don't—this has to be some kind of mistake. Please, man, just let me go.” His nose had started to get snotty; I think he was holding back tears.

“It's not a debt of money you owe. It is a debt of pain. Tell you what: if you can stand on your own, I'll let you go.” I stood up, giving the man my back as I checked my pistol absentmindedly, nothing in particular on it.

“What? I can't—”

“Stand for me, and I'll even call the ambulance myself.” Five feet away from him, I stopped and turned to face him



once more, cocking my head at him, waiting.

What must've been hope, desperate, foolish hope, filled his eyes, and he rolled himself onto his side, endeavoring to stand. His arms were able to prop up his top half, but his legs would not do much—and by putting his knees on the floor, he caused himself a great deal more pain, which he let out by screaming.

“Do you remember Abigail?”

At the mere mention of his ex-girlfriend's name, he froze, his head slow to angle up to look at me. His mouth had fallen open, but not a single word escaped him. I'd rendered him speechless, apparently.

“You didn't care about hurting her, did you? You told the cops it was an accident, that you'd never laid hands on Abigail before the day you pushed her down the stairs and paralyzed her, and they believed you because they so often do—but that was a lie, wasn't it?”

He tried to push himself up, tried to stand, but the farthest he got was a kneeling position, which he then swiftly lost, his body colliding with the floor once more. Face down, he muttered, “Please. Please, I didn't... I didn't mean to.”

“You see, I don't believe you. And, even if I did, it wouldn't matter. I'm here to collect a debt from you. You took away her legs, so I took yours.” I paused, moving around him, stopping when I stood near his feet. I lifted my gun once again, this time aiming it higher on his body, just a bit.

He tried to plead with me, but I spoke over him, “But, like I said, I'm taking interest.” My finger pulled the trigger, and another bullet hit him, on his lower back, at the base of his spine.

He cried out, coughing, attempting to move, but he could not. The only things he could move were his arms and his head, but that was it. He was, quite honestly, helpless, and that was exactly the end he deserved for ruining someone else's life.

I meandered to his bed, taking a seat and watching him all the while, as reality dawned on him, as the realization hit that

he was dying. He would die here, bleed out, and I'd leave him. How long would it be until someone found his body? Would his work call it in, or would he simply turn into a no-show, no-call and get fired?

He held on for longer than I thought he would, and when I watched him breathe his last breath, I got up. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the Guild's phone, snapping a picture of him and his body before walking out. The picture was unnecessary; the Guild liked evidence in your early days, but I was far past those days now.

Still, when I went into the Guild's headquarters, I liked to show the Lioness the picture anyway, before I deleted it. It was my way of wiping myself clean after jobs.

I didn't have to wash any blood off me, so as soon as night fell, I was out of the house and on my way back. The job was only a few hours away, so by the time I got to HQ, it was past midnight. There were still quite a few people coming and going from headquarters; it was open all hours of the day and night.

The Guild's headquarters were located in one of the tallest buildings downtown. Security was as tight as it could be, the glass walls of the place bulletproof. When you first passed the sliding glass doors after getting off the elevator, you were greeted by a projection of a globe, slowly twirling above a round table. To the outside world, the Guild was a high-profile security firm.

As I walked in, someone else was in the process of walking out. He nearly walked right into me, too lost in his own thoughts to pay attention. I recognized his face immediately. Blond hair, near my age, except unlike me, he came from a big family—a family who each worked for the Guild, in various capacities.

“Red Dragon,” I spoke his codename. “Something wrong?” I'd met his brothers a few times, though I'd never met their sister. The Dragons were plentiful, each one just as wild as the other, even if their personalities varied.

He realized it was me and shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. I just had to give the Lioness some bad news so... good luck.” He patted my shoulder once before leaving.

Great. When the Lioness was in a bad mood, well, let’s just say everyone suffered.

I headed to her office. With black tinted glass, the Lioness’s office was as private as you could get in the Guild’s headquarters. She was busy frowning at a tablet in front of her, but when I walked in, she looked up and let out a sigh.

“Ah, Black Wolf. Please tell me it’s done. I don’t think I can take another round of disappointment tonight.” She gave me a tight-lipped smile, gesturing for me to sit in the chair on the other side of her desk.

I was slow to do so, pulling out the Guild’s phone and sliding it over to her.

She picked it up and looked at the picture of the target. The Lioness nodded once and then pushed the phone back to me. “Thank fucking God someone can do their job right, at least. I’ll have the rest of the money wired into your account tomorrow. Good work.”

I took the phone back, deleting the picture before sliding it into my pocket. I got up, not saying a single word to her as I went to leave. Whatever was going on with the Dragons was of no concern to me. I knew better than to ask questions about something that wasn’t any of my business.

But the Lioness had more to say, for she spoke to me, “I heard your sister came asking about you and your job at the Owl. Jeff kept her company for a little while.”

I stopped, slow to turn to face her. I did my best to keep a neutral look, but inside I wanted to pound the nearest wall. What the hell was Taylor thinking, going to talk to Jeff? Going anywhere near there... I didn’t trust the world with her.

“How long is she going to be with you? I understand she’s family, but... well, they were only a cover, weren’t they? Her and her father. Your mother knew that life wasn’t for her. It’s

not for you, either. You were made to carry out the Guild's work. We do things that would keep civilians up at night and haunt their dreams. We're not the same."

"I know."

"Don't let her make you soft," the Lioness warned. "You're far too young to retire just yet."

My jaw ground. "I know."

The Lioness must've sensed I didn't want to talk anymore, for she simply lifted a hand and shooed me away, and I didn't stick around. I left the Guild headquarters and drove back to my place. I pulled into the parking garage and took the elevator up.

Taylor went to the Hooting Owl and spoke to Jeff. She and I would have to have a little chat about that. There were places in this city that were not safe for her. She was safe enough with Jeff, but anywhere the Guild called home, she should to avoid all the same. The Hooting Owl had been a safe meeting place for us that first night, but now...

Now I didn't trust anyone else with her. I didn't trust any other guildmates to keep their filthy hands off her—and I didn't trust myself not to retaliate if I heard they'd tried something with her. Including Jeff.

And if I killed a guildmate or someone who worked for a Guild-associated business, the repercussions would be unavoidable. Taylor would be in danger. So, obviously, for all our sakes, we needed to avoid pushing me off the deep end.

I was back in my apartment within minutes. No lights were on, and not a sound echoed throughout the space. It was late; Taylor had to be asleep. That was probably a good thing, as right now, after hearing about her little excursion to the Hooting Owl, I was a little annoyed.

We'd talk about it tomorrow.

I kicked off my shoes and shuffled to my room, pausing when I was about to pass her room. I hesitated, and then I lifted a hand to the knob on her door, slowly turning it and

pushing it open. When I peered inside through the darkness, I saw Taylor's figure laying under the covers, fast asleep.

She'd been good this week, besides her adventure to the Hooting Owl. I told the guards to alert me if she tried to bring anyone else up here, and I hadn't gotten any alerts—meaning no more boys. Thank fuck for that, at least.

I went to shut her door, and once it was shut, I heaved out a sigh and finished the short trek to my room. I went into the bathroom, tore off my clothes, and hopped in the shower. As the hot water pelted my skin, I tried to imagine how Taylor and my conversation would go tomorrow, but my mind wasn't working well. All I wanted to do was sleep.

So that's what I did once I got out. I went to bed. I went to bed without putting anything on, too tired. That's what going on a job entailed; you had to be constantly alert, even when you weren't on your target's trail, just in case someone had taken notice of you. You had to blend in, do the opposite of stick out. Becoming one with your surroundings, acting inconspicuous; it all took effort.

Usually, on a normal day, I didn't need to use any alarms to get up. But, after getting home so late and being so exhausted, I didn't wake up as early as I typically did.

Don't worry, though. Someone else had noticed I'd returned, because a feminine voice spoke with a huff, "You're back. You're back and you didn't wake me up when you got home."

I turned my head toward the voice, my eyelids cracking open just slightly to see Taylor standing beside my bed with her arms folded over her chest. She was dressed in jeans and a light sweater; ready to go to class.

"It was late," I whispered. "I didn't want to wake you."

"You didn't..." She shook her head, sounding miffed as she went on, "I talked to Jeff. Your job is dangerous, Creed. Why the hell wouldn't you wake me up so I know you're back and you're safe?"

I ran a hand along the side of my face, slow to sit up. The sheet covering me fell to my lap, and Taylor's gaze dropped to my bare chest—but only for a moment. "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't think you'd care too much." Oh, I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it.

"Didn't think I'd care? You were the one icing me out before you left, not me. I—" Taylor stopped herself from saying whatever it was she was going to say. Her lips pursed, her eyebrows furrowing. "I'm mad at you."

That got me to get to my feet after whipping off the sheet. I swung my legs off my bed and stood near her, using my height to my advantage to tower over her. "You're mad at me? Ditto, Taylor. I heard about your trip to the Hooting Owl. You shouldn't go there—"

"I thought it was a safe place. It's where you had us meet."

"That was before."

"Before what?" Taylor demanded to know. When I didn't answer her, she carried on, "And who are you to be mad at me? I didn't do anything. So what if I went to the Hooting Owl? You were gone. I didn't even get any texts from you. You could've been dead and I never would've known." Her green stare held mine, fury in those beautiful eyes. "And... and I was lonely. Even though you weren't talking to me before you left, I still missed you."

Those words meant something different now, something far different than what they'd meant back when she'd first called me and come back into my life. An added weight to them, a new meaning.

"I thought you didn't want to talk to me," I whispered.

"Apparently the only way to talk to you is to do something to annoy you, like waking you up. Or going to talk to Jeff at the Hooting Owl. Or bringing a boy back after a party—"

"Don't." It was all I could say. A single word.

"Don't what?" Her arms fell away from her chest, hanging at her sides. She lifted a finger to my chest, poking me just above my heart. "You're impossible, you know that? You're

just—you're impossible!" She poked me again, but then her breath caught.

Ah. She must've realized I was standing less than a foot in front of her, totally naked.

A blush crept up her cheeks, and Taylor whirled around, giving me her back as she stuttered out, "You're... you're naked!" It sounded as if she could hardly get the words out.

"That's what happens when you wake a man up from his dreams," I said, staring at the back of her head, at her kinky brown hair. How badly I wanted to reach out for her, to turn her around, to watch as that pretty emerald stare dropped to take my entire body in. I barely held back.

"Put some clothes on so we can finish this conversation."

I smirked. "No."

"No? So, you're just going to stand there, naked? Come on, Creed. If this is how you're going to act, then—" She took a step away from me, going to leave, as if I'd let her.

"Then what?" I grabbed her wrist and yanked her back to me. Her body spun toward me, her chest colliding with mine. "You're going to go to another party tonight, hmm? Bring home another boy?"

"Creed," Taylor muttered my name, trying to pull her wrist from me, trying to push herself off me—but I'd moved an arm around her lower back to stop her from doing just that. "At least I get some emotion out of you when I do," she pointed out. "At least then you're not pretending I don't exist."

"What do you want, Taylor? You're the one who told me to get out of your room that night," I reminded her. "I think I showed you plenty of emotion then." My heart had begun to beat wildly in my chest, and I fought internally with certain parts of me—certain lower parts. Parts that had started to ache with a particular need.

"I want you to be my brother, not whatever you were that night." She was going to say more, but I stopped her by letting go of her wrist and taking that hand to her jaw, cupping her jaw and forcing her to gaze up into my eyes. She inhaled

sharply at the movement, suddenly frozen. The pupils in her eyes had dilated, a signal of desire most people might miss.

But I didn't.

"I told you," I breathed out the words, my grip around her lower back tightening, pulling her in even harder against my body, "stop lying. Stop lying to us both." My cock twitched, and I knew right then fighting with it was nothing more than a losing battle. Having her here, in my arms, would get me hard regardless.

Taylor must've felt it, for she let out a breathy sigh, her eyelids fluttering shut.

"How's this for emotion?" I whispered, "If you bring another boy here, if you try to throw another worthless boy in my face, I'll kill him. That's a promise, Taylor." I lowered my head somewhat, asking, "Do you know why I'd do that, why I'd make that promise?"

She could only shake her head once, her jaw still gripped by my hand. Her eyes had peeked open, nothing but slits staring up at me. Both of her hands had found themselves on my chest, palms flat against my skin, taking my heat and exchanging it with some of hers.

"Because you're mine," I murmured. "Because every single part of you belongs to me." I'd known it for a while now. I'd known it for longer than I wanted to admit to myself. Since the first night she'd come back into my life, and I'd known I had to protect her from the world, she'd become mine.

Mine. My Taylor. All mine.

Taylor managed to let out another flutter of a sigh, along with my name, "Creed." So light and airy, like the word itself would be swallowed up in the wind if there were any. Breathless. No one said my name quite like she could. I wanted to hear her say my name just like that while I was buried between her legs.

"You can feel it," I whispered. "You know it. You know you belong to me now. I want to hear you say it." There was



nothing more that I wanted to hear, in fact, other than her admission that she was mine.

She said not a single word.

Well, I guess I'd have to make her realize it.

I brought my lips to hers, kissing her in the same way I'd kissed her before I'd left for the job. I kissed her in the way a man would kiss his girl. Hard and fast, demanding and confident. I stole the air from her lungs and claimed it as my own, along with those soft, luscious lips. I let go of her jaw to tangle my hand in her hair, pulling on the strands gently and making her moan into the kiss.

The arm I had wrapped around her lower back fell so that my other hand could grip her ass, and when I squeezed it she let out another moan. Taylor was putty in my hands, giving in much quicker than she'd done that Friday night.

Oh, yes. She was mine. She was mine, and I wasn't going to stop until I heard her say it. If that meant she stayed here all day, missing her classes, then so be it. It wouldn't be a wasted day. Quite the opposite, actually.

I'd get her to scream out my name, to admit that she was mine. Mark my words.

My mouth left hers, and I breathed out, "You're mine, Taylor. Say it."

The girl was stubborn—or she wanted me to continue. Either way, with how hard my cock was, stopping was the last thing I wanted to do. She said not a word, but she'd stopped fighting me, stopped trying to deny the fire between us.

A resolute determination took over me, and I spun her and walked her back to my bed. I only let her go so I could work on getting her clothes off—getting her to admit she belonged to me would be much easier once she was undressed. Undressed and beneath me, writhing away while I pounded away at the space between her legs.

I lifted her sweater up and over her head, tossing it aside and exposing her bra in the process. When my gaze fell to the smooth curve of her tits underneath that lacy fabric, my balls

tightened in need. Her bra came off next, and the moment those perky tits were exposed, her nipples were hard little pebbles, begging for my mouth.

Taylor stood between me and my bed. I didn't hesitate as I dropped to my knees, lowering my face to her chest and kissing a trail from her neck to her tits. All the while, I murmured, "You're mine, Taylor. Mine." My hands gripped her sides, as if to stop her from escaping me—but I think we'd finally moved past that point.

No more denying this. No more fighting it. No more pretending the connection between us didn't exist. We weren't brother and sister anymore; we'd stopped being that the day I'd left to take my mom's place in the Guild. We were so much more than that now.

She let out a breathy moan when I took a nipple into my mouth, showering it with my tongue. I sucked on it, toyed with her, and as I did so, she groaned, unable to keep it in. I played her like an instrument I was born to play, dragging out sounds from her lungs as I went from one nipple to the other. Such sensitive things.

When I was done with her tits, I tore my mouth off her and dropped my gaze to her jeans. My fingers swept from her sides, moving to undo the button and zipper. Within fifteen seconds, I had yanked down her jeans to her ankles, leaving nothing on her other than her panties. Her panties matched the bra I'd taken off, and they'd join the bra shortly. My fingers hooked around the small fabric on her sides, and I tugged them down her legs, first down along her thighs, and then to her ankles.

I was slow to stand, moving with a purpose as I helped Taylor onto the bed. She let me take the lead, probably because she was still putty, drowning in me. I positioned her on the bed where I wanted her: her head on my pillows and her legs spread wide so I could get a nice, long look at her apex.

Her brown hair was a mess, her eyes half-lidded as she stared at me. Her chest rose and fell with uneven breaths, her

nipples just as pointed as before. Her light skin was flushed. She was beauty personified, and she was all mine.

I knelt at the base of my bed, letting my gaze roam over her naked body. Every inch I memorized, especially that wet, pink area between her thighs. Those lips practically glistened with arousal, with a need for me, and my chest labored with a breath as I lowered myself to it. I breathed in her scent, tucking it deep within my mind, to save for when she wasn't near and I missed her.

Fuck. She smelled amazing. She smelled like heat and sex and desire, all rolled into one.

And she was mine.

I lowered my mouth to her clit, taking the nub of flesh between my lips and swirling my tongue around it. Taylor's body tensed up immediately, a sigh escaping her. Oh, she couldn't deny that she wanted me, that her body reacted to mine. She wouldn't be so wet if she truly thought of me as a brother.

Calling me her brother. Saying she wanted me to be her brother. Just desperate attempts at clinging to the past, but we'd both changed from the people we were. We were older, and together we would make something new. A new union, a new pair. I'd be damned if I ever let her out of my life again. Never again would I walk away from her, this I swore to myself.

I tore my mouth off her clit, running my tongue along her slick folds and dipping it inside of her pussy, lapping her up and making her whine with need. I fucked her with my tongue, eating her out, and the only time I stopped fucking her with my tongue was when I returned to her clit to pay it more attention. Back and forth I went, drawing out sounds from Taylor I was certain no one else ever had.

Those sounds were all mine. I'd bottle them up in my head and save them for later.

"Creed," Taylor whined out my name, again speaking it like no one else ever had. Her hands had started to clutch the

sheet beneath her, and her lower half had begun to tense up. I think I knew she was about to come before she realized it herself.

“Come for me, baby,” I whispered against her sex, “come on my tongue. Come on my tongue like you’re going to come on my cock.” I pushed my tongue into her pussy once again, feeling her hips start to rock. I went to grip her clit, rubbing the side of it to make it feel even better for her.

She could not go against my instruction. She rocked her hips against my face as my tongue fucked her, helping to push herself off the edge. When the orgasm hit her, the muscles in her body tightened, and as the pleasure hit her, she let out a cry of ecstasy.

I was sluggish in pulling my mouth away from her pussy, lifting my fingers away from her clit as I looked up at her. “Good girl,” I murmured, crawling up her body and positioning my cock near that slick entrance. “Now you’re going to do the same thing for me when I’m balls-deep inside of you.”

I brought a hand to her hair, weaving my fingers through its brown lengths and tugging on it gently, exposing her neck to me. My lips met the tender flesh on the crook of her neck, sucking on it hard enough to make a mark. A hickey, but it’d be enough to let any wannabes at her college know she was marked. Marked and taken.

When I was done marking up that beautiful, slender neck of hers, I locked eyes with her and told her, “You’re going to come on my cock, Taylor, do you understand? You’re going to come for me again, and you’re going to admit you’re mine. And if you try to be a brat, well... I’ll just keep going until you say it. I’ll fuck you all day and all night if I have to. I have nowhere else to be.”

Truthfully, there was nowhere else I wanted to be, not now that I had discovered the sweet sounds she could make, not now that I knew what she looked like naked as she unraveled for me.

My cock sat ready at her entrance, ready to push inside of her and feel her pussy wrapped around it. I didn't wait a moment longer. I bore my hips down upon her, sliding my length into her pussy inch after inch.

My body shuddered. Fuck. She felt so fucking good, and she was so fucking wet, too. My Taylor, all worked up for me and my cock.

Taylor inhaled sharply when I filled her, her back arching so I could hit a deeper place inside of her. Her arms curled around my sides, her hands resting on my lower back, nails digging in slightly. She breathed through her mouth, her chest heaving, the undone expression on her face begging for more.

Oh, I planned on giving it to her. Nice and long and hard. By the time I was done with her, she wouldn't be interested in any of the boys at her college. She'd never so much look at another guy again. I'd be the only one to take up space in that head of hers, to dominate her thoughts like I was moments away from dominating her body.

I took my time in working up my pace, letting her get used to the feeling of my cock inside of her before I turned up the assault. She moaned every so often, never loosening her grip on my back. Soon enough, I was pounding away at her with a pace and a strength that made the bed rock, the bedframe trying to keep up with me.

I watched Taylor's face as I fucked her, listening to her sexy sounds. My balls slapped against her ass every time I filled her up, and I had to work to keep myself from erupting immediately. Coming wouldn't stop me; we'd keep going, but I wanted to prove a point, first.

Before I came, she would come again, and she'd admit that she belonged to me.

My other hand went to her jaw, curling around it, my thumb on one side of her mouth and my other fingers on the other. I angled her head so she stared up at me, so she could watch me rock above her.

“You’re mine, Taylor,” I growled out, feeling the resolution and power behind the words in my very soul. “Every single inch of you belongs to me. This mouth—” My thumb ran over her bottom lip. “—this pussy—” I accompanied that with a particularly rough thrust of my hips, making her cry out. “—everything you are is mine now, do you understand?”

All she could do was blindly nod. I had the feeling she’d nod and agree to whatever it was I’d say right now, too lost in the feeling of my body taking hers, of my cock claiming her pussy with each and every thrust.

“Say it,” I commanded her. When she said not a word, I repeated with a growl, “Say it.” And it was a growl; I felt quite animalistic right now, an animal claiming its mate in the only way it could.

“I’m yours,” Taylor purred out the words, her eyes shutting as she surrendered to me. “I’m yours, Creed.”

I was unrelenting in my fucking of her, demanding, “Tell me what’s mine.”

Taylor took a few moments to speak, “Everything. Everything is yours.” She shuddered against me, writhing as my cock pumped in and out of her tight, wet cunt, and then she said exactly what I wanted to hear: “My mouth, my pussy—”

Oh, fuck, *yes*.

I slammed into her hard at that, stifling out any other words she might’ve said. Taylor’s body trembled under mine, her inner core tightening against my cock as her muscles spasmed with another orgasm. This one left her breathless, and her hands fell off my sides as a result. She could only lay there, lost in her orgasm, while I found my own in her pussy.

Feeling her come undone on my length pushed me to the edge, and I couldn’t hold it back any longer. I might be all about control when it came to the job, but when it came to Taylor, control was the last thing on my mind. Losing it was easy when I was with her.

The orgasm came, hard and swift and undeniable. It hit me like a freight train, my body damn near collapsing on top of hers as my cock twitched inside of her, spewing its seed on her inner walls. Pleasure hit me, wave after wave, as I filled her core up with my cum, marking her as mine.

Fuck. I didn't think I'd ever had a more powerful orgasm.

I didn't want this to end, and I sure as shit didn't want to pull my cock out of her, so I rolled us onto our sides, moving my arms around her back to hold her against me. My cock was still hard, still nestled inside her core, and for a while, we simply lay there, basking in what we'd just done. The air smelled of sweat and sex, and if I had my way, the air in this place would never smell of anything else ever again.

I didn't know how much time passed before Taylor said, "Uh... I'm not on birth control."

Shit. Now that was something I hadn't even thought of in the heat of the moment. I supposed pulling out of her would've been smarter, but... how the hell could I have pulled out when my whole intent was to mark her with my cum? Wearing a condom kind of defeated the purpose of that.

But, I supposed a baby right now would be unwise. Not only was this something new between us, but she was also a college student, and I'd bet anything the last thing she wanted was to get pregnant.

I ran a hand down the back of her head, smoothing out her hair. "I'll run out and get something for you today. I'll also schedule an appointment with my doctor for you." We'd get it done. We had to, because, obviously, I wanted to fuck her bareback again. I never, ever wanted to wear a condom while inside her. If there was one place my cum should be, it was inside her.

Eventually we disentangled from each other. I helped Taylor grab her clothes from the floor, not worried about covering myself up. I followed her to the door, watching her walk across the hall to her room.

“You better not clean yourself up,” I told her, watching as she stopped and threw a glance at me over her shoulder. No, if she must go to class today, she’d do it while knowing my cum stained her panties.

This girl was mine now, and I wanted the world to know it.



## Chapter Thirteen – Taylor

“Girl! Is that a hickey?” Beth’s voice was louder than it should’ve been when she met me for lunch on the outside bench we always ate at. She set down a pizza box, eyeing me up, a playful expression on her face.

I tugged on the neckline of my sweater after moving all of my hair over to that side of my neck in an attempt to cover it up. “Um...”

She blinked at me, her mouth falling open. “Who the hell did you hook up with yesterday? And where? Did you go somewhere without me? Because if so, totally not cool.” She flipped up the lid to the pizza box and grabbed her first slice. “I want all the deets.”

There were no deets. I mean, none I could tell her, anyway. I certainly couldn’t tell her that I’d found myself in the bed of my stepbrother, who I was currently living with because I had nowhere else to go, and I definitely couldn’t tell her that he’d given me a hickey and stopped me from washing up after we’d fucked so his cum leaked out of me and dried on my panties.

No. I couldn’t tell her any of that, so what the hell was I going to say?

My face burned with the memory of what Creed and I did, and I tried to hide it by turning my face away and looking off into the distance. Other college students walked on the sidewalks around the little green space we’d claimed. They chatted with each other if they were in pairs or groups, or their attention was focused on their phones if they were alone. I wondered how many of them hid a secret like mine.

Were any of them banging their stepsibling?

“Well? Come on, Taylor, don’t make me pry it out of you,” Beth went on, mouth full of pizza. “Because you know I will. Who was he?”

“He’s... he’s someone from my past,” I was slow to say, reaching for my own slice of pizza. At least while I was chewing, I could think up more to say. “He recently came back into my life. I... I didn’t think it would happen.”

“It obviously did,” she said. When I didn’t offer any more details, she prodded, “How was it? Come on, give me the deets! After last Friday and your brother freaking out, I figured you’d be done for a while. Enough excitement for Taylor—you had to go back to his place, I bet?”

Hmm. I couldn’t tell Beth the details, but maybe I could exaggerate, or give her certain details, pick and choose what I told her.

“No, I brought him back home. My brother wasn’t there.”

Beth’s eyebrows lifted. She clearly wasn’t expecting me to say that. It took her a long while to say, “And? How did it go? Come on! Let me live vicariously through you, just this once.” Even as she said it, I knew it wouldn’t be just this once. If I came to campus with another hickey, she’d demand to know the details of that, too.

“It was...” I trailed off, remembering, letting my memories take over for a bit. I ate some pizza as I recalled everything Creed had said to me, the look he’d given me when he’d first pushed inside of me, like my body was the one thing he craved above all else. “It was hot,” I admitted. “We, uh, actually did it in my brother’s bed.”

She gasped. “No way. Damn, girl!”

Chuckling, I said, “I know.” Really, I still didn’t know what had taken hold of me earlier, but it was like... I didn’t know, like I didn’t have enough willpower to resist Creed again. Like it was easier to give in to him and his body—although now that I knew what he felt like, I couldn’t get him out of my head.

Creed. All I could think about was Creed. Creed, Creed, Creed. He’d gotten me to admit that I belonged to him. His cock must have magic powers, because I swore I’d never admit anything like that on a normal day.

I mean, declaring I belonged to someone else? Come on.

“I’m going to need his name so I can stalk him online,” Beth said, grabbing her second slice of pizza. “Especially if you’re going to hook up with him again. He needs the Beth seal of approval.” She grinned at that.

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I settled with, “He actually isn’t online much.” Yeah, just tell her that he’s not online, so she wouldn’t be able to stalk him on any social media sites, and hopefully she’d drop the name thing.

“That’s a red flag if I ever heard one.”

“What?”

“You know what I mean. Everybody’s online now, even my grandma.” Beth shrugged. “These days, if someone’s not online, it means they’re hiding something—like their real name, or the fact they got a girlfriend. Or maybe a boyfriend.”

I didn’t think I’d have to worry about Creed having a side boyfriend. And as for a girlfriend... well, I already knew he’d paid a chick for sex and he’d stopped seeing her right when I’d come back into his life. Hailee.

And then it hit me: he’d stopped seeing Hailee for *me*.

“Can we please talk about something else?” I asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Sure. I meant to ask, anyway. I got a psych research paper due in two weeks. You’re good at writing papers. I plan on working on it this weekend. You should come over sometime next week and give it a read for me, tell me if there’s anything I should fix.” She took a rather large bite of her pizza slice, chewing thoughtfully. “I need to pass the research paper because I bombed the midterm.”

Reading over her paper was the last thing I wanted to do—I hated re-reading my own papers for mistakes and weak areas—but I usually got near perfect scores on them, so I supposed I could help her out. As long as it meant she’d let this whole hickey business go.

“I’ll help,” I told her, and she smiled at me. Thankfully, she dropped her fascination with who I’d hooked up with, and the rest of our lunch break was normal.

Well, as normal as it could be, with me sitting there with Creed’s cum dried on my panties and my memories aflame with the things we’d done earlier. More than once I caught myself squeezing my thighs together in remembrance, and I had to work to force myself to quit it.

If only it was that easy.

Time crawled by, my afternoon classes not holding my attention at all. My leg bounced, my mind wandering through the lectures. I barely managed to take any notes. All I could think about was getting back to Creed’s place, and what he’d do. What I’d do.

Thinking of what we did should make me ashamed or something, right? It didn’t. In fact, I was pretty sure I’d do it all over again if it came to it. And then there was the whole no birth control thing... it had sounded like Creed wanted to get me on the pill or something, which could only mean one thing.

He wanted to do it again.

He wanted to do *me* again.

The thought should be one I avoided, but that was all I could think about that day. The way he’d spoken to me, how he’d played my body like he was the maestro it had needed all along... he was right when he’d called that guy from the party a boy. Everyone was a boy compared to Creed.

And Creed? He was a man. A strong, tall man with a cock to match, and he knew how to use it. He knew exactly how to rock those hips and hit something deep inside of me that made me want to explode. He knew how to use that tongue of his, and he definitely knew the right words to say to make me lose all sense of self and restraint.

I walked back to the apartment, trying to act normal as I strolled into the fancy lobby and headed straight for the elevators in the back. I forced myself to smile at the man in the

elevator, my hands clutching the straps to my bag so tightly my knuckles had turned white.

The elevator ride up seemed longer than usual, but again, that might be due to the fact that my thoughts still raced from this morning. I literally couldn't get Creed out of my head, and trying to think of anything else only led my mind to return to him and certain inappropriate thoughts to return tenfold.

Sleeping with your stepbrother. Who knew it could be so complicated?

We finally reached my floor, and as the gilded elevator doors opened and I stepped out, I wondered if I was making it complicated for no reason. If all of this worrying was for nothing. It wasn't like we were related by blood, so why did it matter so much?

I just... all my childhood, I'd viewed Creed as a brother. Obviously, he wasn't a brother to me anymore. He was—well, I didn't know what he was to me. I knew what I was to him, though: *his*, but whether that meant he would keep me by his side forever or dump me when he got tired of me, therefore kicking me out on the streets...

Crap. Yes, things were still complicated.

When I walked inside the apartment, I found a plastic bag resting on the countertop in the kitchen. A small note sat inside the bag, resting on top of the package to a morning after pill. The note said Creed had run out to grab some food for us, and to take the pill with a lot of water. I also had an appointment with his doctor next Monday at three forty-five in the afternoon, right after class.

Damn, that was fast. Guess I wouldn't be helping Beth with her paper until Tuesday.

I read the labels on the packaging after getting the pill out. Looked like I might feel a little under the weather once it, uh, worked its magic, but I'd take feeling a little blah over having a baby right now.

A baby. It'd be Creed's baby. Even though I wasn't ready to be a mother, the thought did the opposite of filling me with

dread. Having Creed's baby wouldn't be the worst thing in the world...

Oh, God. Listen to me, talking about babies. *Way to take things too fast, Taylor.*

I got a glass of water and took the pill, drinking the entire glass with it. I then grabbed my bag and went to my room, dropping it on my bed. I pulled out my books and got started on my homework, pretending everything was normal and I hadn't just taken a pill to ensure no pregnancy would result from having sex with Creed.

Sex. With. Creed. I still couldn't believe it happened.

I didn't know how long I lay on my bed, struggling to work on coursework, but it had to be a while. My mind would not focus at all though, much as it had done all day, roaming to Creed and how unbelievably sexy he'd looked naked. Every smooth plane of his chest, his many sculpted abs... and that dick.

I'd always thought dicks looked kind of funny, like an alien appendage or something, but Creed's was the kind of package that made you clench your thighs together and swallow in anticipation. Thick, long, and proud when it stood erect; everything a cock should be.

Shit. I shouldn't be thinking about Creed's dick right now, not when I was trying to do homework.

But, alas, I couldn't shift my mind off the subject of that impressive cock, so I gave up trying to work and put everything away. My textbooks went back into my bag and my bag went on the floor. I walked over to the bathroom and tore off my clothes, my intent to hop in the shower.

I paused in front of the mirror, glancing at my reflection. On my neck, right on the crook of its left side, sat the hickey Creed had given me. I reached up and ran a finger around the darkened skin, inhaling softly as I remembered the feeling of his mouth on me, giving me the mark. He'd left no room to argue with him, left no way for me to deny the fact that I belonged to him.

I shut my eyes for only a moment, and then I got in the shower and turned the water on. I let the water pelt my head once it warmed up, and I turned my attention to my shampoo and my soap, cleaning my body while trying to ignore the burning urge in my lower half. It was like I still rode on cloud nine, like I was ready for more.

Don't get me started on those orgasms. I'd never felt such an extreme release before, never before knew my body was capable of handling such heated pleasure.

The water rinsed my body off, washing away the day's dirt and the suds, and I turned my chin down to watch it circle the drain. My lips parted, the warm water running down my back. Slowly, my eyes closed.

My hand ran down along my body, over my chest and my stomach, dipping between my legs. I sucked in a hard breath when my fingers slid against either side of my clit, the nub already swollen with the barrages of dirty thoughts I'd had today.

Something else took over. I didn't know what I was doing, but I couldn't stop myself. I started to rub my clit, and as I did I imagined Creed was here, doing it for me. I pictured him naked, standing behind me, his arms curled around me in a possessive display of ownership, one wrapped around my chest, helping keep me upright, and the other dipped low to rest between my thighs.

The movement of my fingers sped up, my hips rocking in a natural rhythm that showed just how badly my body wanted more. My heartbeat sped up, my breathing coming up short. My body cried out for another release, and it was like I was on the orgasm fast track.

Time ceased to matter to me as I chased the high only an orgasm could bring. I had to use my other hand to brace myself on the shower wall while touching myself. Heat gathered deep within me, a familiar pressure building in my lower half. The more I touched myself, the more unbearable that pressure became—until I had no choice but to let it out.

The pleasure exploded within me, and I cried out, unable to stop myself. The shower swallowed up any sounds I made, and my knees damn near gave out. I panted, slow to regain control of myself, even slower in pulling my hand away.

I turned my face up to the showerhead, letting the water hit me in the face for a few seconds before reaching and turning it off. I stepped out of the shower and grabbed my towel, drying myself before wrapping it around my body. Once my hair was brushed, I walked out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, looking for a new set of clothes.

The moment I walked out of the bathroom, however, someone else strolled in. Creed froze when he saw me in the towel, his dark stare traveling up to notice my wet hair. He wore a black button-down shirt, its sleeves buttoned at his wrists, along with a pair of black dress pants. His typical wardrobe, I'd learned from living with him. Always looking good.

And if there was girl kryptonite, it was a handsome man in dress clothes.

“Did you...” He trailed off, but whether that was because he didn't want to say it or because he was too busy eyeing me up in the towel was up in the air.

I knew what he meant, though, and I nodded once. “Yeah.”

“I don't know how it's going to affect you, but I bought you a whole bunch of stuff.” He gestured toward the door, and even though it was probably the last thing he wanted to do, he turned and walked away.

Though I should get dressed first, I followed him instead. I went with him to the kitchen, where he'd placed all the grocery bags from his trip out. Creed had stepped aside, and he motioned for me to take a look, so I did. I went through the bags, finding a bit of everything. Chocolate, candy, even some pre-baked stuff like brownies and cupcakes.

He'd gotten all of this because I might not feel well because of the pill? That was kind of sweet. I'd never had



anyone do something like this for me—but then again, I’d never had amazing sex with someone before, either.

“You always liked sugar when you weren’t feeling well,” Creed spoke as I turned around to look at him. “If you don’t like that stuff anymore, give me a list and I’ll run back out.”

I couldn’t help it; I grinned at him. “I still do. Thank you, Creed.” I went to hug him, feeling grateful... and, frankly, maybe still a little frisky after my time in the shower, but Creed took a step back, avoiding my advance. I gave him a strange look at that.

Was he regretting what we did? Were all those words for nothing?

“I don’t—” Creed changed tactics, and as he let out a calm breath, he went on, “If I let you close to me, there’s only one thing I’ll want to do—and your appointment with the doctor isn’t until Monday.”

Oh. So he avoided my hug, avoided touching me altogether, because if I touched him, he’d lose all control and want to fuck me again? I liked that, I liked that a whole lot better than the alternative I’d thought up before.

Shrugging, I acted like it didn’t bother me. “You know, there is such a thing as condoms—” Normally I wouldn’t have had the balls to say something like that, but what was normal had flown out of the window the moment I’d felt Creed’s mouth on mine that Friday night.

Creed’s stare narrowed at me, as if the suggestion of condoms personally offended him.

“Never mind. Well, uh, thank you for all the sweets,” I said, and I turned away from him, returning to my room to change. Maybe it was a guy thing. Or maybe it was just a Creed thing. Maybe he wanted to always come inside me and make me wear his cum the rest of the day, like he’d done today.

There were worse things to be forced to do. I guess I didn’t mind it. If anything, knowing his cum had stained my panties

today had made me crazy in one particular way—and by crazy, I meant horny.

That said, I needed to find a balance. I needed to still pay attention in my classes. I'd find the midpoint after a bit of practice.

I got dressed in pajamas—we weren't going anywhere tonight, so there was no point in putting jeans or leggings on. Nice, comfortable pajamas. And what was more, Creed waited on me hand and foot. I wasn't feeling the effects of the pill yet, but if he wanted to spoil me by making me whatever dinner I wanted, I wasn't going to complain.

What I did want to complain about was the lack of touching. How he avoided being close to me. How, even when we were sitting on the couch later that night, he kept at least a foot between us, sometimes two.

It was torture, okay? The worst kind of torture, now that I had admitted to myself that I might have feelings for the man, stepbrother or not. It was like, all I wanted to do was throw myself at him, to feel his body above mine and give into him again.

But, alas, that was the *last* thing we could do. It sucked.

Come Saturday, I was feeling a little under the weather. Creed, though he still kept his distance from me, was more caring than I thought he'd be. He didn't stop at food and snacks. He made sure I was drinking water throughout the day, even helped me study for a small test I had next week in one of my classes. He did everything he could for me. I never wanted to have another caretaker ever again.

Keeping distance between us was less hard as the weekend wore on, mostly because I wasn't at one hundred percent. When the effects of the pill wore off, though, I knew I'd want to jump his bones again. Honestly, I didn't think that desire would go away anytime soon, if ever.

Creed was an attractive guy. Drop dead gorgeous, the kind of man you could easily imagine pouring liquid chocolate on and licking every inch of his body to get it off. The intensity

that radiated off him made his good looks even more powerful. I swore, he could give spontaneous orgasms simply by giving that smoldering glare.

It was sometime over the weekend that I realized I was in big trouble when it came to Creed. What I was starting to feel... it wasn't just a stupid little crush, something that came out of the blue and left just as easily.

No, it was more than that. When I looked at him, my heart sped up. When I met his stare, my skin grew hot. When I thought about him, my thoughts ran wild, and I thought of things I never had before, like a life with him.

How long would this last? Would he leave me brokenhearted, forced to return to my dad? I didn't want to think about it.

Ignoring my insecurities and my slight sickness thanks to that pill, it was a good weekend. But Monday's doctor appointment couldn't come soon enough. He was coming to Creed's apartment, a traveling doctor, I guess? I took it to mean he would bring pills to give me, along with a prescription I could refill somewhere else—but again, I had no idea how it was going to work.

I was so nervous all throughout the day on Monday, even Beth knew something was off. I told her I'd help her out either Tuesday or Wednesday, that I was busy after class today but I didn't tell her why. I highly doubted normal girls got so excited and anxious about getting onto birth control.

It was a little after two-thirty. I was leaving my last class of the day, ready to go home and meet with this doctor. I followed the rush of students out of the lecture hall after packing up my bag and pushed outside. Just outside the building, a few concrete benches were arranged, along with a bike rack and a trash can. People always hung around there, and today was no different.

I didn't think anything of the people lingering near the doors to the building, and I kept walking. I made it twenty feet out of the building when a strong hand wrapped around my

upper arm and pulled me aside, off the sidewalk and onto the short grassy section near the bike rack.

I didn't even have time to shake the hand off me and demand to know what the hell they were doing, because when I turned my head to see the owner of the hand, I saw a face I never thought I'd see again. At least, not for a while.

A haggard, wrinkled face stared at me, his expression a glower. His hair was greasy, as if he hadn't showered for days. He was slow in letting go of my arm, and he said not a single word, simply glaring at me.

"Dad?" I could barely get the word out. The world spun around me; he was the absolute last person I thought I'd see, especially here on campus. "What are you doing here?" I swallowed after asking that, and it took everything in me to not reach up to my neck. He wasn't choking me, but the memory flashed vivid and bright in my head, intense, as if it had taken place just yesterday.

"I came looking for you," he told me, as if it was obvious—and I supposed it was, because who the hell else would he be here for?

All I could say was, "Why?"

"It's time to come home, Taylor," Dad said, taking on the same tone he always did when he told me what to do. In the past, I'd always ducked my head and did whatever he wanted, just so he wouldn't get angry. And if he'd been drinking, well... nine times out of ten he got angry.

I didn't... I didn't know what to say to him, but I certainly wasn't going to go home with him. "Dad, I—"

"Look, I know I did some things I shouldn't have, maybe said some stuff I shouldn't have, but that doesn't mean you can just leave. I'm your father, Taylor, and what I say goes. Did you forget I'm the one paying for this place?"

I was seconds from correcting him, from reminding him that I'd taken out loans to pay my tuition, therefore it wasn't money out of his pocket—it was out of my future pocket—but I didn't. It would only fall on deaf ears.

Instead, I said, “I’m doing fine, Dad. That’s all that should matter.”

“Well, I’m not,” he hissed out with an ugly frown. “And you’re coming home with me, *now*.” He went to reach for me, to grab my wrist and probably tug me along, to take me back home where I’d be stuck with him forever, but I jumped aside, dodging his outstretched hand.

“No!” I realized I’d raised my voice a bit, so I worked to lower it when I continued, “I’m not. I found someplace else to stay, Dad, and I’m staying there. I’m sorry, but I’m not going home with you.”

In all reality, he only wanted me to come home so he’d have someone to take care of him and the house. Cook, clean, do the laundry, make sure all the bills were paid on time—the sort of thing he should be used to worrying about, not me. I was his daughter, and yet I’d been acting as the adult of the house for so long now.

And not only that, but also taking his abuse because I had nowhere else to go.

Well, I had somewhere else now, and I wasn’t going to look back.

His face twisted in a sneer, and I couldn’t help it; I threw a glance over my shoulder at the other students walking by on the sidewalk, seeing if they noticed the scene going down. A few people threw glimpses our way, but they didn’t stop. Most pretended not to see.

“Bullshit,” my dad spat. “Where the hell you staying, huh? You got friends I don’t know about?” The tone he took was both furious and disdainful, as if he couldn’t believe I could have friends, let alone a friend that would let me stay with them indefinitely.

I didn’t appreciate the look he gave me, nor did I appreciate the insinuation that I was too weird to have friends, so I said something I’d probably regret: “For your information, I’m staying with Creed—and he said I can stay with him for as

long as I want, so no, I don't think I'll be going home with you."

Standing up for myself, again. Look at me, growing a backbone when it came to my dad and the way he treated me and talked to me. It had only taken nineteen years... and a choking.

The instant I said Creed's name, my dad's expression changed. It morphed from one of annoyance and rage to one of shock—but that shock didn't last. "You whoring yourself out to your old stepbrother, then?" He chuckled at that. "You think he'll let you stay forever, Taylor? Got news for you: everyone gets tired of you, even me. I'm the only one willing to put up with you."

Whoring myself out? Hearing that, watching him say it with a straight face, as if that's really what he thought about me, filled me with a dark, dangerous kind of rage I didn't think I'd ever felt before.

"Creed is a better man than you," I spoke with words in a growl, narrowing my eyes at him. My voice came out low and steady, almost menacing, "He's twice the man you are. Nothing you say or do here matters, because I'm never going home with you. I've moved on, and I suggest you do the same."

I didn't give him the time to retort, spinning on my heels and walking away after that, my pace quick. I heard him try to stutter out a response, but I didn't stop; I kept going, holding my head high as I went.

What was going on between Creed and me, something my dad couldn't possibly know about, wasn't whoring myself out. It was... it was more than that. It wasn't just a hot morning of sex or a series of passionate kisses. It was so much more.

Creed was in my soul. He'd taken hold of me the moment I'd seen him in that bar. He'd taken root so deeply inside of me, I'd never be free of him again—and I didn't want to be. I didn't want to go another day without him, didn't want to turn my back to him and spend the next ten years daydreaming about him again.

No. It was so much more than my dad could ever know.

But he wouldn't know. My dad could never know that Creed and I were together like that. He was a spiteful, vindictive man—coming to the college, cornering me after one of my classes proved it. Who knew the lengths he'd go in order to make my life, and Creed's by extension, miserable?

He was my dad. My only family, really. The only one I had left, other than Creed. A part of me did feel some obligation toward him—that's what had kept me in his house. That was what had stopped me from moving on, even when his anger became too much.

But... but so what? So what if he was my only family? Blood wasn't everything.

*Blood wasn't everything.* That's something I never really understood, not until now. Just because you shared blood with someone didn't make everything they did to you okay. It didn't excuse their mistakes or their sins. You didn't have to sit there and take it, to shut up and accept whatever abuse they threw your way. You could walk away.

Not everyone had the chance to walk away, though. Sometimes things escalated quickly, like that night with my dad. One minute he was mad at me, and the next, his hands were around my neck, and he was choking the life out of me. I felt sorry for anyone who didn't have the opportunity to walk away.

I made it back before the doctor arrived. Creed was sitting near the island, drinking something as he looked at his phone, but when I walked in, he set it down, turning his dark-haired head to look at me.

One look. One look was all it took for him to know something was wrong.

He got to his feet, gliding over to me as his dark eyebrows furrowed. "What happened?"

I didn't say anything right away; I walked past him, heading to my room, where I dropped my bag and let out a

sigh. Leaning my back against the wall, I turned my head up to the ceiling as I listened to Creed follow me.

“Taylor,” he spoke my name with urgency, “what happened?”

My eyes closed, and I was slow in lowering my head. When I opened my eyes, I stared right at Creed; he’d moved to stand before me, a stern expression on his face. And yet, as intense as he looked right now, I knew he’d never hurt me.

Might be a dick every once in a while, but he’d never hurt me, never lay a hand on me like my dad had.

I didn’t want to tell him, but he wouldn’t let it go, so it was pointless to try to hide it. “My dad found me after class. He was waiting for me, right outside the building.”

Hell, I didn’t even know how he’d found me. Had he called someone and gotten my schedule? I didn’t think he was the kind of guy who was smart enough to know how to track a phone, but maybe I didn’t give him enough credit.

Creed’s expression darkened when I mentioned my dad. “Are you all right? Did he try to hurt you again? I’ll—”

“I’m fine,” I quickly said. Creed didn’t have to finish that sentence; I knew what he was going to say, because he’d threatened to kill any random boy I brought back here. The thing was... if he said he’d kill my dad, he’d mean it, and I wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“What did he want?” Creed asked, folding his arms over his chest, prickly. It was as if he hated that he wasn’t there with me, to defend me. A showdown between him and my dad would be something to see, but one would definitely wind up in the hospital—or a body bag—and it wouldn’t be Creed.

“He wanted me to come home with him,” I said. “Pretty much demanded it.” As I spoke, Creed’s expression darkened even more, but I finished by saying, “I told him off.”

He nodded once. “Good.”

“I... might’ve told him I was living with you.” I lifted a hand and rubbed the back of my neck, letting my gaze shift to



the floor. “He wasn’t very thrilled about that.” A bitter smile managed to grace my face. “I don’t think I’ve ever told him off like that. It felt good to tell him I wasn’t going home with him.”

Creed inched closer to me, his voice a mere whisper, “If he tries to come for you again, call me. No matter what I’m doing, I’ll drop everything and come. That asshole will never get his hands on you again, I promise you, Taylor.”

If anyone else would’ve made that promise, I would’ve laughed. But it was Creed, and if there was one thing Creed was, it was serious. Totally, utterly serious. I believed him, and having someone who’d do anything they could to defend me, to protect me, filled me with a sense of peace nothing else ever had in my life.

“Thank you,” I whispered, wanting to push off the wall and bury my face against his chest, but I stayed back—mainly because of how Creed had kept distance between us all weekend. Didn’t want him losing control right now, not when the doctor visit was so near.

“You don’t have to thank me. I’ll always do everything I can for you. I have ten years to make up for.”

I couldn’t help but grin at that. “You don’t have to make up for the last ten years.”

“Oh, but I do. I left you, and I’ll never forgive myself for that.” He looked as though he wanted to reach out and touch me, draw a hand along the side of my face and hold me against him, but in the end, he simply sighed and pulled himself away from me.

I watched him go, a tightness rising in my belly. A want, a strong, unyielding desire that refused to be forgotten or pushed away. These feelings I had for Creed were only growing, and I couldn’t lie; I was scared about what would come next.

I’d never been in love before, but I had the feeling I was already past the point of no return when it came to Creed. It might sound fast to some people, but... there was so much history. It wasn’t like he was a stranger to me.

I was falling for Creed, and I hoped I wouldn't get hurt because of it.

## Chapter Fourteen – Creed

The doctor that came was a Guild hire. He made house visits for Guild members, prescribed things that kept our medical histories away from the public eye. He could even get us certain things that a regular doctor at any old hospital couldn't. Strong pain meds, drugs, even. I hardly used him, but that was because, before now, I never had a reason to.

I didn't get hurt on the job, not often, anyway—and when I did, it was never anything major. No surgeries required. Nothing that a little sleep and some pain management couldn't fix.

He was a middle-aged man, totally unassuming, and he came with a briefcase. He didn't wear a doctor's coat, but he did wear a snug suit. I introduced him to Taylor, and then he got to work, measuring her, weighing her, asking her a few personal questions.

If she was sexually active, how many partners she'd had...

I tried not to listen, but since I refused to leave the living room, where they were, I overheard. It shouldn't shock me that she'd been with someone before me, but I couldn't help it: I prickled with irritation, knowing someone else out there knew how her pussy felt wrapped around their cock.

Hmm. Maybe I should get his name from her, track him down, and eliminate him. Then I'd be the only man on this earth that knew the wonders of her body and all the sounds she could make.

But Taylor wouldn't like that. She wouldn't want me to kill someone just because they'd slept with her in the past.

Of course, she also didn't know what I did for a living. Security; it's the lie many members of the Guild told their partners if they were civilians, the de facto lie. If she knew that I killed, that my wealth had been built on blood and death,

would she still accept the room, the bed, and all the clothes within?

Taylor had a kind soul. She wouldn't want me to kill. I knew that. She was kind, even if she could be a little bratty sometimes. She was a good person. It's why she'd stayed so long, why she'd put herself through hell for so long before coming to me. I'd given her my family's number so she could contact me if she needed me, if anything bad happened.

Being abused by her worthless as fuck dad... Taylor should've called me sooner.

But she hadn't, and so we were forced to deal with our current hand, such as it was.

"Now," the doctor said, rifling through his open briefcase, which he'd set on the opposite end of the couch from where Taylor sat, fiddling with her fingers. "I'm going to give you a three-month supply with the lowest hormones. There are countless of others we can try if you decide you don't like the side effects." He set a small box on the couch. "If I don't hear from you, I'll assume everything is alright, and I'll set up a mail cycle to send you a new case every three months."

He took the box and handed it to Taylor. "You can start taking them tonight, if you must. Just start with the first Monday pill. Typically it's advised to begin on the first Sunday after your last period to help with the transition, but..." He trailed off, probably because he knew we weren't going to wait that long.

I couldn't, anyway.

"Just make sure to set an alarm in your phone so you know to take them at the same time every day," he instructed.

As Taylor opened the box and counted three individual packets of pills resting inside, the doctor straightened out. He closed his briefcase and picked it up, moving around the couch, toward me. I stood more towards the kitchen, my arms folded over my chest, a scowl on my face.

Yeah, I guess I was still pretty pissed off at hearing that she'd slept with someone else.

“Is there anything you’d like me to take a look at while I’m here?” the doctor asked.

“No,” I told him. “That’s it.” I led the doctor to the door.

“Alright. Well, I’ll have your account billed.” When he reached the door, he gave me a smile and shook my hand. He spoke loudly, so Taylor could hear, “Have a good day.”

“You, too,” I muttered, quick to shut and lock the door once he was out. I took my time in turning around, mostly because I needed to calm myself down. There was no need to be so insanely jealous over someone who was, in all probability, nothing more than a boy, just like the one she’d brought home after that party.

A boy. You could not compare a boy to me. We were on different levels entirely.

I walked to the living room, where Taylor sat, having not moved a muscle. The box with the pill packages still sat in her hands, and she angled her head up at me. “I guess I should set an alarm. What time should I do?”

I shrugged. “Probably sometime at night, when you know you’ll be here. Unless you want to set it for the morning, but then you’ll have to wake up early on the weekends.”

“Eight, I think, starting tonight.” She leaned over, reached in her back pocket for her phone, and pulled it out. She unlocked the screen, seconds from setting an alarm, when her brow furrowed and she glanced at me.

“What?” I asked, unable to read the look she gave me.

“My phone. It’s saying emergencies only.” She frowned. “I’m not connected to any network.”

I sat beside her, though I was still careful to keep some distance between us. I held my hand between us, palm upward, and she gave me her phone. I toyed with the airplane mode, putting it on and then turning it off; sometimes when a phone was fucking up, that’s all you had to do to get it to reconnect to the network.

But it didn't work. When it went off airplane mode, it still showed emergencies only, no signal at all beyond that. No cellular name next to the bars near the battery. I restarted the phone, had Taylor put in her passcode again, to the same end result. Nothing changed.

"I've never had problems with it before," Taylor whispered.

And then it occurred to me. Really, it should've hit me sooner, but it took that long to sink in. "Your dad. You said you told him off. I bet that pissed him off, and he did the only thing he could, the only thing you were still dependent on him for." I handed her phone back to her.

She sighed. "Great."

"It's not a big deal. We'll run out and get you your own phone, whatever you want. I'll get you your own plan. He might think this is a way to punish you, but..." God, I really wanted to touch her, to feel her hand slip into mine, to hold her and comfort her—and perhaps do other things, things that had been on my mind since Friday morning, when she'd left for class wearing my spent cum in her panties. "I'm not going to let him."

She smiled at me, her worry instantly gone. "Thank you."

"I told you, you don't have to thank me." I was more than happy to help her however I could.

"I know, but I want to say it." Taylor paused. "I mean it. Thank you, Creed. Thank you for everything." She spoke it while staring at me, hardly blinking. It was as if she purposefully tested my resolve, my will to resist her until I could shower every inch of her skin with my lips again.

Never had waiting been harder.

We went out to get her a new phone after that. She didn't want to pick any of the new, top of the line models; she instead opted for last year's model, but with the pink metal back. The woman at the store was able to transfer her contacts, and we got her hooked up to a new network under her own plan. New number and everything, so her dad wouldn't be able to contact

her using her old one. She was completely cut off from him now.

Honestly, it's something I should've thought of before, but I'd been too preoccupied with her to really sit down and think about any of that stuff.

We grabbed dinner on the way home, and she took her first pill at eight o'clock sharp. She reminded me she was going to help her friend, Beth, with some paper that was due, probably tomorrow, so she'd run late.

That was fine, because having her here, knowing I couldn't touch her, was the worst kind of torture. I'd thought I was a man with an iron will, but when it came to Taylor, I was anything but strong.

She made me weak. She made me so weak, and she didn't even know it. Taylor made me want to fall to my knees and beg for forgiveness, to repent for my sins—and there was an awful lot, trust me. She was someone I shouldn't crave so desperately, but the only one I wanted.

She was everything to me, and I couldn't wait until I could have her body under mine, writhing and sweaty once more.

Time could not pass quickly enough.

## Chapter Fifteen – Taylor

When I saw Beth the next day, she asked, “What’s with the new number? I didn’t know you were getting a new phone.” It was late in the afternoon; we were walking to her dorm. I figured I should try to help her with that paper now rather than later, mostly because it would help keep my mind off Creed and the fact that I was officially on birth control.

Just one pill so far. Not enough to rely on it quite yet.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, my new phone snug in the back pocket of my jeans. “My old phone was getting slow.” Not exactly a lie; it had been an old phone, a model that was a year or two old even when I’d gotten it years ago. Phones these days weren’t meant to last that long. A sad fact of reality.

Another sad fact of reality was... maybe I wanted to wait to be with Creed again because I was scared that whatever fire had been between us last Friday had been nothing more than a fluke.

What if it was? What if we came together again and it wasn’t the same? My heart hurt at the mere possibility.

“I hear that,” Beth muttered. “I’m due for a new one soon, too.” She said that, even though I remembered when she’d gotten that phone last year. She’d come to class and showed it off to me before our professor had taken over the room. But she was the kind of person who always had to upgrade, the kind of person who needed the newest model, even if upgrading didn’t really get you much in terms of a better battery or higher quality pictures.

Phones these days... they were pretty much all the same, weren’t they?

“I don’t like switching phones,” I admitted. “Everything’s just a little different than before, and it drives me nuts.” Menus were organized a tad different, the buttons on the side were slimmer, the cameras on the back a little bigger so it felt



different when you held onto it. Again; everything was the same, but different. I hated it.

In truth, I'd only had two phones in my whole life. Dad never had much money to pay for them to begin with, so I'd always made do with the older models and made them last as long as they possibly could. Hell, the only reason I had this new phone was because I'd refused to go home with him and he had my old one shut off.

The newer things were nice, of course, but I didn't need them to survive.

"I get that," Beth said. "Sometimes it's nice having something you know in and out."

We walked through campus, heading to her dormitory building, which sat on the outskirts of the city blocks the college had claimed for its own. I followed her up to her dorm, and she pushed inside the room after sticking her key in the door handle to unlock it. And, just like before, her roommate was nowhere to be seen.

I dropped my bag on the floor while Beth grabbed her roommate's desk chair and dragged it over to her side of the room, near her desk and her identical chair. "Doesn't it get lonely in here, with your roommate gone all the time? Do you even know if she's alive?"

Beth let out a chuckle. "Yeah, she's alive. I just saw her Sunday. She was here for about three hours, and then she was gone." She shrugged, sliding into her wooden chair. No wheels for their desk chairs. No way to lean back and be comfortable; it was probably why Beth had gotten a cushion to put on the seat. "It's not too bad, really. I've heard horror stories about devil roommates, and I'd rather have someone who's never around than someone who has no life."

No life. Those words hit me harder than they should've, but Beth didn't know. I had no life. If I would've signed up for the dorms and roomed with someone, I would've been the roommate who was always there, hanging by herself, because she had no place else to be, no friends to hang out with.

So, instead of saying my thoughts on the matter, I simply said, “Yeah.” Mostly to agree with her. I’d done that a lot in our time together; I was pretty sure that was why we’d ended up as friends. Hard not to be friends with someone when they constantly agreed with whatever you said.

But, even though Beth and I weren’t exactly the same, I liked her. I enjoyed being friends with her. I didn’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have her, other than be lonely.

“Well, you wanna jump right into it?” Beth asked, bending over to unzip her bag and pull out her laptop, which she then set on her desk and turned on. “If you want snacks, we can run down and get some. I have no idea how long this will take.”

“Maybe in a bit,” I told her. I wasn’t too hungry right now, anyway.

Her laptop turned on, and she opened up the document with her paper. She pushed it toward me, saying, “Don’t hold back. If there’s something you think I need to fix, tell me. I need to get a good grade on this.”

I nodded, my eyes shifting to the screen and the beginning of her paper. Papers, regardless of how long they had to be, were pretty much all the same—at least in the college sphere.

Each and every professor, regardless of what they were teaching, wanted the same thing: an introduction which included a hook, some background info on the main subject of the paper, and a thesis you would then write about. That thesis was usually three-pronged. Three main points.

And then you had your counterargument, and then the counter to the counter. That was my least favorite part, because trying to think up a way someone might counter your whole paper was annoying.

And, of course, you couldn’t forget the conclusion at the end. Tying everything together in a neat bow as you finished presenting whatever it was you wrote about while hoping it was good enough to nab you a decent grade.

My papers always did pretty well; Beth knew that, hence why I was here.

Some professors let you send in a draft, which they would then mark up and send back to you, with stuff they wanted you to fix. I guess this professor wasn't one of those.

Beth waited until I read over the entirety of the paper once before asking, "Well? How is it? Is there a lot you think I should fix?" She let out a sigh. "Lay it on me."

The paper wasn't horrible, but... it could be better, and I told her that.

Together, we worked on her paper. Sometimes I'd slide the laptop back over to her so she could rewrite something or add a bit more explanation after a quotation from one of her five mandatory credible sources.

We worked for a while, though we did stop to head down to the ground floor to get some snacks. I didn't even realize how much time had passed until I happened to glance toward the lone window in the room and see that dusk had fallen.

Crap. I didn't mean to spend this long here. I should go.

But, on the other hand, she'd just finished tweaking her counterargument, which was my last issue with her paper. All I really had to do was one final read-through just to make sure everything she'd changed and added flowed.

I decided to text Creed: *Almost done. Sorry it's taking longer than I thought.*

His text back was almost instant. *Call me when you're done. I'll come pick you up. I don't want you walking home by yourself in the dark.*

I fought the smile that message rose up within me; it didn't surprise me Creed didn't want me to walk home in the dark. Beth saw my smile, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she studied me and asked, "You talking to that guy still? The one you refuse to tell me his name? The one who supposedly isn't on any socials?" She couldn't get over that part.

"I, uh... sort of, yeah, but that wasn't him. That was my brother."

“You know, I’ve been curious about him, too. You’ve never really talked much about him. Heck, before a little bit ago, I didn’t even know you had a brother,” Beth pointed out. She had her phone in her hands the next second. “Please tell me he’s somewhere I can stalk—”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said.

She let out a huff of a sound, saying, “You and your weird guys. Seriously. You know two guys who aren’t on anything? What are the odds? Like I said before—everyone’s on something, even if they say they’re not. It just means they’re hiding something.”

“I told you, he’s not hiding anything. And as for my brother... his job keeps him pretty busy. He’s never really gotten into social media.” As far as I knew, that wasn’t a lie. With Creed’s job, with how dangerous it could be, I’d bet there were rules against having social media profiles. It could potentially put a target on his back or on the back of whoever his security firm was working for at the moment.

Beth started to say something else, but I lifted a hand to stop her, turning my attention back to the paper. “Let me do one last read-through,” I told her. “It’s getting late.”

She tossed a glance over her shoulder, spotting the darkening world outside. “Yeah, okay. You’re right. Wouldn’t want you to stay up past your bedtime.” Though she poked fun at me, she spoke it seriously.

Yeah, we wouldn’t want that.

It took me another half hour to comb through it once more, and when I finished, I had a few other small things she could work on, if she wanted to push for a good grade. As it stood right now, she could probably turn it in and get a B, maybe a low A. If she wanted a near perfect score, she’d work on tightening up the language she used and make her counterargument stronger.

When I was finished, Beth offered to walk me home, but I told her I’d be fine. She only wanted to walk me home to see my brother—who she was insanely curious about now—and if

I told her that my brother was picking me up, she'd offer to come downstairs with me and wait with me... to see him, of course.

Beth didn't know Creed was my stepbrother. She didn't know he was my mystery guy who avoided social media. I did wonder what she'd say if she knew, and maybe one day I'd tell her, but today was not that day.

After saying goodbye to her, I left her dorm room and went to the elevator. Once I was on it, I called Creed, and he picked up on the second ring. "Hey," I said, "I'm done."

"Send me the address, and I'll be right there. Wait in the lobby until I'm there. I'll text you when I'm outside."

I couldn't even rattle off a sarcastic *Yes, sir* before he hung up. Straight to business, I guess, but that fit Creed. Creed wasn't someone who beat around the bush or someone who rambled just to hear himself talk.

I had to Google the name of the dorm building to get the address, but once I had it, I copied and pasted it in a text to Creed, and then I took up a seat in the lobby near the front doors and waited.

Creed texted me the moment his sleek, shiny car pulled up in the small pull-off near the front doors—it's where everyone loaded and unloaded their car when they were moving or coming in with a lot of bags. You could only leave your car there for fifteen minutes, otherwise you'd get a ticket, according to a sign stationed near the turn-off.

I got up and headed out, going straight to his car. As I climbed in, Creed's dark eyes were on me. "Have fun?" he asked.

"Fun re-reading the same paper multiple times? Yeah, tons." My sarcasm might've been laid on a bit too thick, but I didn't care.

Creed pulled us onto the street. "Someone's feeling feisty." He shot me a look—and this look said more than his words ever could. This look was the typical Creed look: intense and

smug, with a hint of mischievousness. At least, it was the usual expression he gave me.

“I’m not being feisty. I’m just saying, working on papers isn’t exactly fun stuff.” I had to turn my head and stare out of the window, my heart skipping a beat at the look Creed had given me. Certain ideas I’d rather avoid for another few days popped into my head.

Waiting was going to be torture, wasn’t it? Now that I wasn’t feeling shitty like I’d been over the weekend, now that I knew Creed and I were one step closer to being one again, I couldn’t hide my anticipation or my excitement.

Maybe it was wrong, maybe it wasn’t. I didn’t care anymore.

“I think we should do something,” I said. “Something this weekend.” My head turned so I looked at him once more. He was busy driving, so I could stare at him and his handsome profile in peace. “I want to go somewhere with you.”

Creed didn’t hesitate to ask, “And where would you like to go, Taylor?”

“I don’t know.” I thought back to the party Beth had dragged me to, where I’d met that guy—that guy whose name I couldn’t even remember anymore, because the only man in my head was Creed.

He wasn’t a partier. I couldn’t take him to a college party. I’d risk Beth seeing him, or Beth’s other friends seeing us—and I wouldn’t know where to go to start with.

What was like a party, but not? Somewhere I could do some research on, find it easily on the internet? Somewhere the lights were low and you could lose yourself to the night, somewhere Creed and I could be together, and no one would know us?

And then it hit me.

“A club,” I said. “Let’s go to a club.” Those were easily searchable online. There had to be multiple clubs in the city; we could choose one that was the furthest away from the college to avoid any possible sightings. We could dress up a

little, have fun, dance together. A club wasn't my kind of place, but as long as I had Creed by my side, I'd be okay.

And, besides, with Creed it would be fun.

Creed made a right turn, and then he glanced at me. "You want to go to a club? Really? I thought you didn't like going out." He sounded a little suspicious.

"Maybe I want to show you off."

"Maybe I don't like the idea of showing you off to other guys." His jealousy peeked through, which made me chuckle, and my chuckling only got him to huff, "What? I'm serious. I'm sure guys are always staring at you, even if you're too oblivious to notice."

I didn't know about that, but I did know there would be no arguing with Creed if that's what he really thought. "You don't have to worry about other guys. I..." My voice dropped to a bare whisper, and I reached over the center console to touch Creed's arm. "I only want you."

Was that too much to say? Creed had said I belonged to him numerous times already, but it felt different, hearing me say it.

Creed dropped his right arm, pulling his right hand off the steering wheel. He grabbed hold of the hand I'd set on him, his fingers curling around mine tightly. He tossed me a lingering look. "All right, fine. We'll go to a club, if that's what you want to do." When I didn't say anything, when I only stared back at him, he asked, "What?"

"I said I only want you. That's when you say you only want me, too," I whispered. Unless me belonging to him didn't mean he only wanted me. What if Creed wanted to possess me so no one else could? I knew that didn't make sense, as he'd already stopped seeing Hailee, but still; the doubt was there.

I couldn't tell if Creed seethed at that or not. The man was hard to read, especially when he kept his focus on the road. His hand still curled around mine, and he squeezed me harder as he drove. Within another minute, we were pulling into the parking garage beneath his building.

I still stared at him, even as he parked the car and turned her off. I said not a single word more, my heart beating quickly in my chest, constricting with the need to hear him say it. I didn't want to just belong to him; I wanted the belonging to go both ways.

He undid his seatbelt, turning the top half of his body toward me. In the dim lighting of the parking garage, he looked intimidating and menacing, and yet I'd never felt safer. Even if he didn't say it, I knew this man would do anything to protect me.

And that was why it killed me to this day, him walking away from me ten years ago.

"Of course I want you," Creed whispered. "You and only you." He still held onto my hand, and he held it tight as his other arm lifted, swiping at some hair that had fallen in front of my eyes. "I don't want anyone else, Taylor. You're it for me, and I promise you, I will never leave you again."

A declaration in a parking garage, while sitting in a car and staring intently at each other. A strange place, but then again, nothing between us was normal. We had a complicated past, sure, but things didn't need to be complicated anymore.

We were adults. We shared no blood. We could be together however we wanted to. I should've realized that before.

"Creed," I whispered his name. It was the only thing I could say, the only word that escaped me as I gazed into the shadows that were his eyes. He leaned over the center console and pressed his lips upon mine, sealing our words with a kiss. It was the first time I'd felt his lips on mine since the morning I'd stopped resisting him.

And, God, his lips felt so good. So firm and commanding. He took charge, even when it was just a kiss. Creed wasn't the kind of guy that could ever let someone else take the helm; he'd never relinquish his dominant side.

Who was I kidding? In the bedroom, it was hot. Being told what to do, to take it like a good girl... yeah, I could go for



some of that right now, but as it was, it was about time to get upstairs and take my second pill.

And eat dinner, since all I'd eaten with Beth were snacks.

He must've known it was almost time for my next pill, because he pulled his mouth off mine, releasing my hand too. "Let's get upstairs."

As I walked with him, as we walked to the elevator and headed up, I wondered if that meant we were exclusive. If he was my boyfriend and I was his girlfriend. Seemed a bit high school, putting a label to it—but if he wanted me and only me, and I wanted him and only him, that had to be what that meant.

We were official. As official as we could be, given the circumstances.

Creed fixed us some dinner, and I took my second pill. It wasn't anything fancy, just some pasta, but it was good enough for me. I hopped in the shower afterward, washing off the day's dirt.

During dinner, I'd mentioned to Creed that I would feel more comfortable waiting until a few more days had passed before we completely relied on the birth control—and I'd nearly died of embarrassment when I'd said it. But I'd said it, and he'd agreed with me, told me that we would wait however long it took until I felt comfortable again.

Of course, when he'd said that, I could totally tell he'd be more than happy to push aside his plate and eat something else instead. *Cough, cough*, me.

I tried not to think too much about it as I showered, and when I got out, I reached for my towel to dry myself off. I had the towel wrapped around my body as I brushed through my damp hair when the door slowly creaked open, and through the steam I saw Creed.

He slipped inside, shutting the door behind him, a glint in his black eyes that told me certain parts of me were on his mind. He walked toward me, took the brush out of my hand, and set it beside the sink on the vanity. One of his hands curled

around my hip, over the towel, and he turned me toward him, pinning my back against the edge of the vanity's countertop.

"You know," he whispered, his voice husky and low, giving rise to goosebumps on my skin even though the room was still hot with steam, "there are other things we could do."

My breath caught when his other hand went for my chest, where the towel was tucked in, and within another moment, he yanked it off and let the towel fall to the floor. I stood before him, naked, my damp hair cool on my back and his other hand hot on my side.

Creed's gaze dropped to take in my naked body, devouring my appearance as if he'd never seen me before, like I was an oasis and he was a man wandering the wastes in search of something to save his life.

His hands started to roam my body, caressing every inch of skin they danced along. I held in a gasp when one of his hands slipped between my thighs and curved along me, dipping between my folds and circling my entrance, his palm applying pressure to my clit in the process.

His body blocked out the world, his head dipping low as he whispered, "I can't get you out of my mind, Taylor. The way you look with my cock buried inside you. The sounds you make when I'm fucking you long and hard." He slipped a finger into me, and that time I couldn't hold back the gasp. "The way your pussy clenches around my cock when you come." His finger began to rock in and out of me, fucking me slowly.

My body tingled with pleasure, my nerves on fire already. Creed had a way about him that made me a whimpering mess.

"I think about you all of the time, and it takes every ounce of restraint in me to not haul you over my shoulder and carry you to my room, where I want to fuck you until the morning comes," Creed murmured.

I started to rock my hips along with the rhythm of his finger, but right then he withdrew it from me, pulling it out

and lifting it up between us. He brought it to his face, and he breathed in deeply, as if inhaling the scent of my arousal.

“But like I said, there are other things we could do.” He pushed the finger that had just been inside of me toward me, holding it less than an inch in front of my lips. His dark brown gaze was heavy with desire, and he wordlessly told me what he wanted me to do.

And what was more, I had the feeling I knew exactly what he wanted, even before he said what he said next.

“Be a good girl, and I’ll give you something in return,” Creed promised. He did not move the finger away from my lips, waiting.

*Be a good girl.* If there was anyone to be good for, it was Creed.

I opened my mouth, letting him push the finger past my lips. With his finger fully in my mouth, my lips closed around it, and I swirled my tongue around the lower half, tasting myself. And then, I didn’t know what got ahold of me, but after I did that, I started to suck on it.

Creed let out a haggard breath, his tall frame hunching over me. He pulled his finger out of my mouth and said, “That’s a good girl, now get on your knees for me.” The finger that had just been inside of my mouth tilted my chin back, forcing me to gaze up into his half-lidded eyes. “And be careful with those teeth.”

He didn’t have to outright say what he wanted me to do; I knew what he meant, and that’s why I stuttered, “I—I’ve never done this before.” I didn’t want to mess up, do it terribly, or worse: hurt him.

He smirked. “Good. Your mouth belongs to me now, remember? Don’t worry, Taylor. Let me take the lead. I’ll walk you through it... just mind those teeth.”

If there was anyone I trusted not to kill me by stuffing his dick so deep into my mouth I couldn’t breathe, it was Creed. Still, that didn’t make me feel much better as I sank to my knees before him, lowering myself until I was near eye-level

with the bulge in his pants. I had to keep a straight back, along with actually kneeling; he really was a tall guy.

Creed's voice commanded me, "Undo my belt and my pants."

He didn't need to say it twice. I lifted both arms, attempting to calm myself as I fiddled with his belt to undo it. After it was undone, I worked on his pants next, hyper aware that his erect cock was right there, ready to be freed. My cheeks flushed, knowing I'd have that cock in my mouth soon enough.

I pulled down his pants, exposing his boxer briefs and the bulge in them. I could see the outline of his hard cock; this was an angle I'd never seen his cock before. If anything, it looked even more impressive at eye-level.

Creed must've realized I was too busy staring at the bulge, for he hooked his thumbs around the sides of his boxer briefs and pulled them down, exposing his cock. It sprang free instantly, speared directly at my face, all long and hard and thick.

He kicked his pants and boxer briefs aside, standing with his feet flat on the tiled floor, his cock less than six inches in front of my face. "Open your mouth, Taylor. Take me in."

I glanced up at his face for a split second, finding he stared down at me, his head angled severely to do so. The moment my gaze dropped back to his cock, I parted my lips. His hips inched closer, and I took his tip into my mouth.

"Lick it," he ordered. "Swirl your tongue around the tip. Suck it like a lollipop. Do whatever you want—just don't use your teeth." As he said that, one of his hands found the top of my head, fingers weaving through my hair.

I closed my eyes and did as he said. I used my tongue on it, swirling it around best I could. I gave it a little suck, just to see, and I tasted something salty from the center of the tip. Creed moaned above me, telling me that he indeed liked the sucking.

I could do more of that.

So I did. I sucked more. Creed let out another moan, and the hand on my head guided my head back and forth, drawing my mouth along the length of his cock. He didn't push himself too deep in me; he was being pretty slow about it, but I think that was because it was my first time. I hoped I could get him there—and if I didn't, I guess that just meant we'd have to practice more.

I had the feeling neither one of us would mind that.

I was too focused on giving pleasure to Creed, too focused on sucking his length every time he thrust his hips, too focused on keeping my mouth as open as it could be and avoiding the accidental use of my teeth, that time ceased to matter. It was almost as though I'd become one with Creed, both of us desperate to seek out his release. The desire in me to make him explode was so strong it was basically a need.

A need, not a want. I needed to make Creed come, needed to taste more of that salty cum.

When Creed picked up the pace, pushing his cock deeper into my throat, I gagged a little, but I held it in, sheer willpower pushing me through the initial uncomfortableness of having a hard cock spearing my mouth.

It got to the point where he thrust so quickly into my mouth it grew impossible to suck him off—but that's when his hand on my head tightened and he managed to murmur, "Let me fuck your mouth, Taylor, and then I'll fuck that pussy with my tongue."

My thighs clenched together when he said that, and I didn't want to fight him. Couldn't resist him. All I could do, all I wanted to do, was let him fuck my mouth, as he'd said.

And, God, did he fuck it. Oh, I bet it'd be sexy as fuck to watch. I wished I could both be a part of it and watch at the same time. Me, naked and on my knees, and Creed, naked below the waist, his cock pumping in and out of my mouth like it was my pussy. I nearly spontaneously combusted at the thought.

“You’re going to swallow me up,” Creed told me. “Every single drop. I don’t want anything wasted. Do you understand?”

What could I do? I couldn’t say yes, couldn’t even nod. The only thing I could do was keep still and let him continue fucking my mouth, so that’s what I did. Like hell would I pull my mouth off his cock when he came; I wanted to swallow him up as badly as he wanted me to do it. Not even a drop would spill out of my mouth. I’d be a good girl for Creed.

He came shortly after that, his hips thrusting at a rapid pace. A low groan came from him, like thunder filling the room, a primal sound to match a primal act. Hot, salty cum spewed from his cock, shooting into the back of my throat in quick, short bursts.

It happened so fast, at first I didn’t know what to do, but before Creed finished coming, he withdrew his cock a bit, his tip near the edge of my tongue as he let out one last gush of cum. That last shot I tasted, and when he pulled his cock out of my mouth, I swallowed, opening my eyes and gazing up at him.

His chest rumbled with approval. “Good girl,” Creed cooed, bending over to pick me up. He lifted me onto the vanity countertop, setting my ass on the edge and spreading my legs wide. The marble countertop was cold, and I shivered. Our gazes locked. “Now it’s my turn to make you unravel.”

Creed didn’t hesitate; he lowered himself to his knees. His hands gripped my outer thighs, and when he was in position, he helped scoot my ass closer to the edge. With my knees on either side of his head, I was ready to feel that mouth again. That mouth, that tongue, the orgasm that would follow.

He got to work, running his tongue along my slit. When that tongue met with my clit and his mouth latched on, sucking on it, I had to throw my head back and moan. I mimicked what he’d done when I was on my knees; I put a hand in his hair, fingers tensing and gripping his hair roughly.

I thought I knew what to expect since I’d felt that mouth down there before, but it was different tonight. Maybe because

I'd stopped denying what was between us—or maybe it was because I knew how good he was with that mouth, so the anticipation coursing through my veins made everything hit harder.

Seriously. Every move, every flick of that tongue; it all inched me closer to the edge. I felt like I could come already.

He showered my clit with ample attention, giving that swollen nub something to ache over before lowering that tongue to my pussy. I was already at a fever pitch when his tongue first slid into me, but once he started to fuck me with that tongue, pausing only to lick all the way up to my clit every so often, I lost whatever measly control I had left.

My hips rocked against his face, my back arching, as if the motion could let that tongue deeper into my pussy. The fingers I had in his hair tightened their hold, and I let out a low moan as the pressure became too much inside.

I came while his tongue was inside me, the orgasm hitting me so hard my thighs came together around his head and I saw stars. My muscles contracted on their own, the pleasure in me dominating me like only Creed could.

By the time Creed withdrew his face from between my thighs, I was lost in bliss. I could hardly think, and any logical thought in my head was quickly taken over by the high feeling that lingered after the orgasm subsided.

As Creed stood, he whispered, “I can’t wait to watch you come on my cock again.” He licked his lips, moving to stand between my knees, gliding his hands up along my legs. The way he looked at me told me he wanted more, so much more—and if I was honest, I wanted more, too. As fun as that had been, as amazing as that orgasm was, it was nothing like being fucked by him.

His mouth was amazing, but his cock was even better.

“Soon,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck and bringing his face down to mine. Even sitting on the edge of the counter, Creed was still a little taller than me. The man was basically a giant, but I did love feeling small beside him.

Creed let me kiss him, but he did murmur against my lips, “I’m going to wear out this mouth of yours this week.” He pushed his lips on mine again, kissing me harder, and his tongue slipped its way into my mouth, brushing against mine.

My whole body hummed against his.

I hoped that was a promise.



## Chapter Sixteen – Creed

Taylor wanted to wait until the weekend to fully enjoy each other again, and I acquiesced, knowing there were other ways we could get off. Like I'd told her, that mouth of hers got a workout in the days leading up to Friday, and to her credit, she was getting better. Bolder. She was learning what I liked, what pushed me to the edge faster.

It didn't escape my mind that she wanted to go out to a club on Friday, the first day she was comfortable being with me again after starting birth control. She wanted to get dressed up, go dancing, and then come home and get fucked.

Of course, she didn't say that last part, but I think we both knew that's exactly what she wanted.

I didn't know what you were supposed to wear to a club. I'd never really gone out anywhere; for obvious reasons, getting drunk and hooking up with strangers at bars and clubs hadn't been on my list of things to do. But Taylor wanted to go, so we would go.

I would not, however, stand idly by and let every man ogle her like a piece of meat. That much I knew. Maybe fists would get thrown, maybe it'd be all posturing. I didn't know. I made no promises tonight, because when it came to Taylor, I couldn't help it. She was mine, and the mere idea that other men would look at her with lust—while in my presence, no less—filled me with a jealous type of rage I'd never felt before.

Since it was Taylor's night out, I let her dress me. She went for a long-sleeved black button-down shirt—that way I could, and I quote, *roll up the sleeves to my elbows*, because it was *sexy*, or so she said.

Personally, I had no idea what made rolled-up sleeves so sexy, but I let it go.

She paired it with black pants. No belt; she wanted my shirt untucked, I guess. And that was fine; probably didn't want to look too put together at a club.

After picking my outfit, she went to get changed, already having hers picked out. When she came out of her room, she looked... fuck, she looked hot as hell. In a tiny black dress that mimicked the one she'd worn to that last party, every part of her body was either on display or barely hidden beneath its satin fabric. It ended just above her thighs; one wrong move and her ass would be on display. The same could be said of her tits; it was strapless.

She paired the look with slick, studded heels, and she'd straightened her brown hair and done a little makeup around her green eyes, making their hue sparkle like emeralds.

I wanted to rush over to her, sweep her up in my arms, and carry her to my room—for surely, we could skip the whole club part and get straight to the dirty business—but I managed to resist, knowing she wanted to go out. “Are you sure you won't be cold in that?”

“Pretty sure the club will be warm,” she said, walking over to me. I leaned on the island in the kitchen, all dressed and ready to go. “At least, I think so.” She grinned at me, her full lips wearing a nude matte color. “Are you ready?”

I nodded, and together, we left.

Taylor had chosen a club on the far side of the city, so it took us twenty minutes to drive through downtown to get there. She wanted to avoid any of the clubs that students from her college went to; she'd told me she wanted to avoid seeing her friends tonight. Beth, the one she'd gone to that party with, liked to go out and was always trying to drag Taylor with her, supposedly.

Beth. Though I'd never met the girl, she hadn't exactly been a great influence on Taylor. Taking her to a party, letting her leave that party with a stranger. What the fuck would've happened if she would've brought home a killer? I might've been too late. You couldn't trust anyone in this city.

Or anywhere, really.

But Taylor lived in blissful ignorance of that fact, and I was trying to let it go. Besides, if she never would've brought that kid home that night, I never would've kissed her... and if I never would've kissed her and taught her the difference between a boy and a man, I doubted we'd be where we were today.

I had to parallel park in the street so we could get close to the door to the club. If there was one thing you were guaranteed while in the heart of the city, it was that there was never enough parking.

I got out of the car, walked around the hood, and went to hold open the door for Taylor, helping her out. I couldn't help but let my gaze drop to her body when she stepped out and fixed her dress. She did look stunning.

No, more than that. She looked downright hot. Sexy as hell. Sin on two legs. Taylor probably had no idea how crazy she could drive men—and boys, I guess. Anyone with a cock who was old enough to have the general idea of how to use it.

She slipped her hand in mine, and together we walked toward the club on the sidewalk.

At night, the city was a different place. Full of bright neon lights and flickering signs, the sidewalks were never empty. This was a college city, so its nightlife was on another level. People were always caught up in their own lives; it's what made this city such a perfect home for the Guild. No one cared enough to really pay attention to what you were doing.

Taylor had chosen this particular club because it was located far enough away from her college that she'd assumed she'd be safe from accidentally walking into her friend or someone who knew her friend—but that didn't mean the club wasn't packed. The sidewalk leading up to the front doors was evidence enough of what dwelled within.

People. Lots and lots of people.

Most of the girls were dressed similarly to Taylor, with tight, short dresses that left nothing to the imagination. Hair

that was either curled or crimped; in no way their natural hair. Lots of sparkling jewelry and makeup that made them look as if they'd been airbrushed.

That's one thing I liked about Taylor. Even when she wore makeup, she didn't layer it on her face. She never hid her true beauty. She didn't need to spend an hour or more in front of a mirror every single morning to be gorgeous. She simply was.

The guys all wore similar clothes: jeans and t-shirts, basically. Where the girls tried hard, the guys hardly tried at all. That, I think, was akin to how guys usually tried outside environments like this. We'd been blessed with dicks. We ran the world, and we dictated that women should be the ones to yearn for a non-natural beauty.

We walked up to the door, where the bouncer stood, collecting money and checking identification—you had to be at least eighteen to enter a club like this, and if you were under twenty-one, you got a stamp on your arm that probably wouldn't wash off too easily. As I handed over our I.D.s for the bouncer to check, I couldn't help but toss a glance around us.

All of these people, these strangers, crammed into one place together. It definitely wasn't safe. Working for the Guild, doing what I did, knowing the lengths humanity would go to make others suffer... it had made me strongly dislike crowds in general.

The bouncer handed our I.D.s back, and he rattled off the cost to enter. A few feet away, another bouncer stood, looking sour as he constantly surveyed the crowd that had gathered in front of the doors.

I handed him my card, which he then held up against a small device attached to his phone. He gave it back and spoke, gruff, "Left arm." This was directly at Taylor, and she offered up her left arm in response. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small stamp, pressing it just above her wrist, on her forearm. With a harsh jerk of his head, we were finally allowed in.

I took Taylor's hand in mine, and together, we pushed inside.

If I thought the outside of the place was crowded, it was nothing compared to how busy the inside of the club was. Once you got through the small hall near the entrance, it opened up into a large space with hanging lights that twirled on the high ceiling. The place was dark, save for the flashing of the disco lights every now and then, and nearly the entire room was a dance floor. A bar area sat on the far side of the room on the right, but not many people hung around it. Most, it looked like, were busy dancing in front of the DJ or wherever they could shake their bodies.

The music was loud, too. It thumped in the air so hard you could feel it in your bones. It rattled your heart and got your blood pumping. I couldn't imagine how much louder the music was if you were near the DJ in the back, near his giant speakers.

I didn't know what Taylor wanted to do, if she wanted to dance or if there was something else she had planned. It seemed like the only thing to do here, besides drink if you were over twenty-one, was dance. I wasn't much of a dancer myself, but if that's what she wanted, I would try.

Make a fool of myself, most likely, but for her, I'd play the fool if I had to.

I leaned down to her, asking in a shout, "Do you want to dance?" You had to shout if you wanted yourself to be heard over the ridiculously loud music. I was twenty-nine years old; places like this never appealed to me, but I could understand why some might like it. A place where you could dress up and pretend to be someone else, maybe hook up with a stranger, and when tomorrow rolled around, act like nothing happened.

Taylor nodded, and I led her into the crowd dancing to the beat. Dancing, jumping, grinding; whatever verb you wanted to use to describe what they were doing. As we walked, I tried not to notice how random guys would check her out, how their heads turned as she sauntered by, their eyes often dropping to her ass and her legs.

I could contain the jealousy inside. I could.

No, more like I had to. I couldn't go around starting fights in public places, especially places where people could easily take out their phones and film it. As a Guild member, I was forbidden from the spotlight. It's why I was clueless as a grandparent when it came to Facebook or Instagram or whatever new app people were using these days.

I didn't need to be good at those apps to do my job. Hunting and killing was one of the oldest professions in the book; far older than the internet in general.

I stopped walking when we reached the center of the big crowd, pulling Taylor toward me. Her chest leaned against mine, and her head angled up at me, the dim lights shining in those pretty green eyes. There was hardly any room for us here; I could feel the people around us gyrating with their own movements, but I supposed that was the point.

With one quick look around, it seemed there was no set way to dance. Some couples were grinding, others were just swaying with the beat. Since I was not the kind of man who could sit back and let someone else take the lead, I chose how we would dance.

I set my hands on Taylor's hips, fingers digging into the dress as I spun her around, slamming her backside against me. With the height difference, her ass wasn't quite level with what she should be grinding against, but that was fine. I didn't mind. If I felt that ass grinding directly on my cock, I might just lose whatever cool I had left.

Taylor leaned her head back against my chest, and together, with my hands on her sides, we danced.

We danced for I didn't know how long. I stopped paying attention to the songs playing, tuned out the people around us. Every ounce of my attention zeroed in on Taylor. The way she moved, how sweat lined her face after a while, the way she made certain parts of me hard even if she didn't grind directly on it.

We moved like frantic, erratic animals, stuck in a crowd of strangers doing the same. I didn't know if I'd call it fun—I'd much rather be at home, just her and I, where I could shower her body with the attention it deserved—but it certainly wasn't boring.

I couldn't say how long we danced before Taylor reached up a hand and wiped the sweat off her brow. She mouthed the words, *I'm thirsty* up at me, and I gave her a nod and took her by the hand, leading her out of the dancing crowd, toward the bar. My cock was rock hard, but I didn't care. I wasn't the only one sporting a bulge in a place like this... and with the dim lights, it wasn't like it was totally visible.

We made it to the bar, but the bartender was on the other side of the bar, refilling someone else's drink. I leaned against the counter, trying to get the guy's attention, but he was too busy flirting with a pair of girls who wanted more drinks.

After a while, when the dude still wouldn't look over at us, I told Taylor, "I'll grab him. Stay here." It was only a twenty-foot walk, but you never knew. The last thing I wanted to do was lose sight of Taylor in a place like this. It'd take forever to find her again. Or, at least, it'd feel like forever.

As she nodded at me, I left her side, zigzagging around the people who were talking near the bar. I leaned on the counter near the pair of girls the bartender was flirting with, and I spoke loudly, "Hey man, we need a drink down there."

The bartender was younger than me; it had to be why he let the pretty faces of girls in the club distract him from his actual job. He told the girls he'd be right back, and then he stood in front of me, saying, "Sure, man, what'll you have?"

"You got any Dr. Pepper or Cherry Coke?"

"I got that D.P." Trying to be cool, I guess, but only sounding weird to me. He probably wasn't used to anyone ordering anything that didn't have alcohol mixed in it, somehow.

"Give me one, and a glass of water too. We're down there." I pointed to the other end of the bar, where Taylor was

—except I saw Taylor wasn't alone. A pair of guys had come up to her and were currently trying to talk to her.

I literally couldn't leave her alone for five seconds in this place. I mean, come on. What the fuck? My jaw ground, and I pushed away from the bar counter as the bartender got to work getting our drinks. I headed back, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

I knew she'd get too much attention in that dress. Even when I was right beside her, that didn't stop anyone from checking her out. The fucking gall of these guys.

"Sorry," Taylor was busy saying when I came upon her and the two guys, "I'm with someone—" You could hardly hear her voice over the music.

The two guys were plain. Neither particularly handsome or well-built. Neither one intimidated me. Still, they saw me walking up and one of them had the balls to say, "I don't mind. Just one dance."

I set a hand on Taylor's lower back, staking claim on her without saying a word. My eyes turned to size up the two guys before her, and I frowned at them. She turned her head toward me, noticing my unhappy expression right away. The two guys, on the other hand, either were oblivious or chose not to care. Both were mistakes on their part.

"She's with me," I told them, narrowing my eyes at them. "Now why don't you two leave while I'm still feeling nice?" I practically growled out that question. Anyone who was sane would hear the danger in my tone, would understand that I was not to be trifled with.

But they were dumb. They didn't take the not-so-subtle hint. The one puffed himself up, like he could make himself appear bigger and I would back down. Neither were as tall as me, though, and neither were as fit. I could take them both down without breaking a sweat. Hell, I bet I could do it without blinking.

I moved to step in between them and Taylor, leaning over them with a sneer on my face. "I suggest you find another girl



to occupy your time with,” I growled out, “because I’d rather kill you than stand back and watch your fumbling attempts at picking up my girl.”

The one I’d spoken the threat to let out a chuckle—but it was a mirthless sound, joyless, like deep down, he knew I was being serious and he shouldn’t take me lightly. The other guy took a step back and pulled on his friend’s sleeve.

“Come on, man, it ain’t worth it. There are other girls,” his friend said.

“Your friend’s smart,” I whispered. “You should go.”

I could tell he didn’t want to move, didn’t want to leave and give up whatever claim he thought he had made on Taylor in the short time I was gone, but in the end, he did just that. As he and his friend walked away, mumbling something under their breaths at me, I turned back to Taylor.

She was busy reaching for the drink the bartender had placed before us: the Dr. Pepper. She took a sip, eyebrows furrowing as she asked, “What did you say to them?” She didn’t hear me, which was good. Threatening strangers was something she wouldn’t approve of, I’d bet.

I took the glass of water and downed half of it in two gulps as I shrugged. I couldn’t tell her that I’d threatened him, but I didn’t want to lie to her, either. So, I would settle for simply not telling her.

As we stood there and drank, refueled, I couldn’t stop myself from eyeing her up. In that tight little black dress, Taylor was hot. The hottest girl in this club, without a question. It wasn’t a wonder why those guys had come up to her the moment she was alone, hoping against all odds she’d give them the time of day.

But she wasn’t a free girl. She was claimed. This one was mine, and she always would be.

Taylor set down her glass after taking another sip, and she inched toward me, leaning her head against my chest. “You’re the only one I want,” she told me, slow to lift those green eyes up at me, the words of affirmation good to hear.

I was still beyond annoyed at those guys, but she had a way of calming me down. Still, though... there was something I had to do before we left this club for the night, something that would make everyone—the guys especially—know that Taylor was not a dish for them, that she wasn't on their menu.

She went to take another sip, but I grabbed her wrist instantly after that, cutting the sip short. I pulled her along, not stopping when I heard her yell, "What's going on?" I tugged her away from the bar, to the dancing crowd. We moved through the people, my goal the deepest part of the club, in the dark corners of the place, one of the few spots where no one danced.

It was closer to the DJ's booth, so the music did get louder. If Taylor said anything else after that, I didn't hear her. I didn't need to. I knew how to read her body, knew that certain parts of her could be more articulate. Sometimes you didn't need to use words.

I pulled her around me, pushing her back against the wall and pinning her there. We were only ten feet from the corner of the dancing crowd, but it didn't matter. With the low lights, with my back to them, they wouldn't see much of anything—however, those that did see would know exactly what we were doing.

I brought a hand to Taylor's jaw, tilting her head back. I leaned down, pressing my lips on hers in a rush, kissing her just as hard and as fast as the beat of the song playing in the speakers. She came to life, those ridiculously soft lips melding into mine, accepting whatever I would give.

If she thought I'd taken her to this dark corner of the club to simply kiss her, she had another thing coming.

Tearing my mouth off hers, I dipped my mouth low against her neck, kissing the tender crook of it and making her squirm against me. I didn't doubt I would've heard a sigh escape her lips if the music wouldn't have been so loud, the same kind of breathless sigh she always let out when she was giving in to me.

My hands found the bottom hem of her dress on her thighs, and they curled around it, starting to bunch it up. Taylor didn't stop me; she had to feel just how riled up she'd gotten me when we'd danced. Add onto that how annoyed those two guys had made me for daring to come on to her, and I was ready to mark my territory.

One of my hands slipped between her thighs, bunching up her dress even more. She held onto my forearms for dear life when that hand yanked her panties aside and touched her along her most private part.

Slick. Wet for me. Worked up from dancing with me, if I had to guess. Worked up because she knew tonight was the night we would be together again.

And, fuck, it had been so very long since the first time we'd both given in to the passion and the cravings we had for one another.

I dipped a finger inside her pussy. Had to make her ready for another part of me; fucking against a wall wasn't going to be the easiest thing for us, since she was so damned short. I'd probably have to heave her up, lift her off her feet, and fuck her while she held onto me. But until then, I'd get that pussy dripping wet.

My finger moved in and out of her pussy slowly at first. Taylor's head fell back against the wall, and through the shadows of the club, I could see her staring up at me, her mouth agape as she panted. Her hips rocked back and forth with my finger, as if she was trying to ride it as she would ride my cock.

I wasn't one to let my partner take charge, but Taylor would look absolutely hot as hell on top of me, riding me until we both came.

I lifted my lips off her neck to straighten myself out, to watch her while my hand toyed with her. The look she gave me, even in the darkness, told me she was ready. That lustful look told me she wanted me to fuck her.

That was good, because that was exactly why we'd moved to this part of the club.

As I slipped my finger out of her pussy, I swore I could feel the muscles in her core tighten around it, as if she didn't want me to leave it, but I wouldn't leave it for long. Something else would take its place soon enough.

My hands moved off her, to my pants. With a quick jerk of my fingers, my button and zipper were undone, and in the next moment, my cock was out.

I pinned her against the wall, yanking her dress up further, past her thighs so I could get at her pussy unobstructed. My feet spread, lowering me somewhat, and I slipped an arm around her lower back, hoisting her up and spreading her legs on either side of me. I used my other hand to guide my cock to her entrance, her panties still pushed aside.

And then, when my tip prodded that slick pussy, I bore my hips against her, pushing my length into her core inch after inch until I filled her up completely.

Taylor had moved to wrap her arms around my neck, and when I filled her, she moaned. I couldn't hear it above the music, but I knew she did, because her pussy clamped down around my cock at the same time.

My hips rocked, dragging my cock out before roughly shoving it back in. I didn't fuck her to the beat of the music; I fucked her like a wild animal claiming its mate in front of its pack, in front of a lesser creature who had tried to take my mate for its own.

She was mine. Goddamn it. She was all mine and I'd never let her go.

I fucked her hard and fast, my cock working overtime. Every muscle in my lower half strained with the awkward position, the heat of the club and our previous dancing not doing me any favors. With her legs on either side of me, my hands gripping their sides to help keep them up, the most anyone would see were those legs. Those legs and my back,

along with my pants—which might appear loose, since they were undone in the front.

I didn't want any guy to see Taylor naked, but they could see me fuck her. They could see me mark her and know she was off-limits to them forever. The girl was mine, and if I had to mark my territory everywhere we went just so they'd understand that, then so be it.

Taylor's arms tightened around my neck, and though I couldn't get a good view of her face due to our position, I knew what was about to happen. I knew she probably cried out, the sound of her pleasure drowned out by the loud music. I knew she threw her head back in her bliss as the orgasm took hold of her, choked her, and refused to let her go. Her inner core tightened around my cock as I continued to fuck her, drawing out a groan from me.

God, she felt so fucking good, especially when she was coming—and knowing she was coming on my cock gave me a smug satisfaction nothing else in this world could.

Feeling her orgasm, knowing I'd brought it out of her so quickly, made me fuck her harder. Harder, longer, more roughly. Short, quick thrusts of my hips pushed my cock into that wet pussy, over and over again until my own orgasm threatened to spill over.

I was going to come inside of her and make her walk out of this club with my wet cum between her thighs, and then when we got home, I'd tear that little dress off of her and fuck her all over again. Taylor would never so much as look at other men when she had me. I wanted to fill her every thought, waking and dreaming. I wanted to dominate every inch of soft skin on her body, every curve it contained, and own the arousal that blossomed between her thighs when she was turned on.

The orgasm building within me became too strong to deny. It hit me like a shockwave, and I jerked my cock deep into her cunt, letting out a thunderous moan that would've rattled the walls if the speakers hadn't already been doing it. The muscles in my body spasmed uncontrollably, and my cock twitched

inside of her as it emptied load after load of cum into her. Shot after shot, I filled her up and then some.

I was slow in pulling out of her, helping her to stand on her own two feet. I fixed her panties first, then pulled down her dress, all before getting to me and my cock.

With a quick glance over my shoulder, I saw no one was paying attention to us. We'd literally just fucked in the corner of this club and no one noticed—and if they had, they apparently didn't care.

Taylor was a little wobbly on her feet, for good reason, I supposed, so after stuffing myself away and positioning my cock in a way that my lingering erection wouldn't be horribly noticeable, I wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her off the wall. I think we'd both had our fill of this club tonight.

Besides, I was pretty damned eager to get her home, alone, where I could really fuck her like I meant it.

We weaved through the dancing crowd, and we passed the two guys that had tried coming onto Taylor. They eyed us both up as we passed, but one glare from me had them turning their heads and pretending they didn't notice us. We headed toward the front door, and we slipped out of the club, into the cool night air.

I led her back to my car, helping her in the front seat. Once I got in, I turned the vehicle on and got us going. I tossed a smirk her way, asking, "How was that for a night out?"

Taylor was still breathless, although if I had my way, she'd be breathless the rest of the night—and neither one of us would get a wink of sleep. The back of her head rested on the headrest, and she turned toward me, a slow smile gracing her lips. "That was..." She apparently couldn't think of what to say.

I grabbed her hand as I drove, squeezing it. "Had to remind you that you belong to me."

She laughed at that. "Me, or prove a point to those guys and anyone else who might be looking?" Ah, she already knew me too well.

The smirk on my face morphed into an outright grin. “All of the above.”

Again, she laughed. “What am I going to do with you?”

“The better question is: what am *I* going to do with *you*?” I threw her a mischievous look. “I hoped you didn’t plan on getting much sleep tonight, Taylor. It’s been one hell of a long week. I want my sheets to smell like you by the time we’re done.”

Taylor turned her face away from me, I’d bet to hide her blushing. The car was dark, so it wasn’t like I could see the heat creeping up her cheeks, anyway. “What do I smell like?”

My body still buzzed with the high of fucking her in the club, and it took me way too long to answer, “I don’t know. You just smell good. Like I just want to inhale you...” I paused. “Or devour you whole.”

“Creed,” she whispered my name, like she always did. No one else could say my name like her. No one even came close.

“What? It’s true. You know it’s true. This, us—it’s fate. I’ve never been one to believe in things like that, not until now. There’s no use denying it when you feel it, too.” If I wasn’t driving, I would’ve taken hold of her, brought her into my chest and held her there. “You make me weak. You make me strong. You drive me crazy sometimes, but the thought of you in my life keeps me sane. You give me whiplash and yet you’re the one constant thing I need.”

Again, she said my name, “Creed,” only this time, she said it differently. Softer, the word barely audible. This time my name sounded like a whispered prayer on her tongue, like I was the penultimate answer to all of her prayers.

We were at a red light, which was the only reason I was able to turn to look at her when I said this next part. “I love you, Taylor.” And then, because I wasn’t sure how long the red light was, I reached over the center console, pulled her in, and kissed her.

If Taylor was breathless before, she was even more breathless after that kiss, but alas, it was a green light now,

which meant I had to let her go and resume driving. She had been rendered speechless, no words coming out of that pretty little mouth.

But it was true. I loved her. Not just as a stepbrother should love his stepsister. Not only in the way family should love each other. I loved her more than that. I think it had hit me that first night, when I'd seen her sitting in that booth all by herself, looking so sorrowful. It had struck me then, and I'd been too blinded by clinging to the past to realize it.

It wasn't love at first sight, because that wasn't the first time I'd seen her. I didn't know what it would be considered, but I did know many people would think me insane for confessing such intense feelings—not only for my stepsister but for someone who'd only come back into my life weeks ago.

Weeks. That was all it had been, and yet it felt like years.

Taylor didn't say anything as I drove us home. In fact, she waited until we were upstairs, safely in private, before she spoke. I had taken her hand and was leading her down the hall, to my bedroom, where I planned on showering every inch of her body in kisses before railing her again, but she pulled us to a stop just outside of my room.

“Creed,” Taylor whispered. She'd left her heels by the front door, now standing even shorter before me. “I—”

I squeezed her hand. “You don't have to say it if you don't want to, if you're not ready.”

“No,” she told me. “I'm ready. I want to say it.” She swallowed, glancing down, acting awkward... like she'd never told another guy this before. And perhaps she hadn't; overhearing her sexual history when the doctor had been here... let's just say she didn't have much history.

Enough to piss me off, but not a lot, in retrospect.

Her voice came out in a rushed whisper when she said, “I love you too, Creed. I think I've been in love with you since I was a kid.” Taylor paused. “Is that weird?”



I didn't know if it was or not, but there couldn't be too many people out there in the world with a similar situation as us, so who was I to say what was weird and what wasn't? I could be no judge of that.

In the end, I said, "No," because I didn't think it was. Not when it was us. Taylor and I were destined for each other; that much I already knew. How could it be weird when it was us?

I pulled her in close, brought my mouth down upon hers once more, and while kissing her, I backed us up into my bedroom, where I then spun her and threw her onto my bed. The look she gave me right then and there told me she was ready for whatever I had in store for her tonight.

Let's see if I could wear us both out.

## Chapter Seventeen – Taylor

If there was one thing I'd learned about Creed, it's that he was the jealous sort. Not the kind of guy who got jealous and made threats at me or tried to hurt me. It was more like he got all alpha and had to mark his territory to make others understand I wasn't available. He got all *mine, mine, mine* when it came to me and guys sniffing around.

There was a certain kind of sexiness to it. Maybe due to the fact that I enjoyed watching Creed take charge and make me his, or maybe because I just thought he was sexy when he was all glares and growls while trying to intimidate other guys, like those two at the club last Friday.

Oh, yeah. Couldn't forget them or that their little come on had turned into a quickie in the corner of the club.

Yeah, sex in public. Never thought I'd have any of that, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't exhilarating, fun in a way that only something forbidden could be. Maybe Creed was bringing out a little kink in me. First the good girl stuff, then sex in public. What was next?

Come Monday morning, I went to class. Met with Beth for lunch, like we usually did. I'd made sure to scrub off the stamp from the club extra hard on Saturday, so my skin wouldn't show any signs of ink or redness from being scrubbed so much.

Let's just say that ink was pretty damn permanent. It had taken a *lot* of scrubbing to come off.

Beth and I sat in the student union, something we didn't normally do. It was raining outside though, so inside for lunch we were. I got a salad with loads of croutons—my favorite salad item—while Beth had opted for a six inch sub at the sandwich place.

The student union was the main hub of campus, multiple floors with important offices and big ballrooms for any events

that were held on campus. But even so, I didn't spend much time in this particular building.

"Do anything fun this weekend?" she asked. Her black hair was greasy, up in a messy bun, typical Monday fashion for a lot of college students with long hair, even the guys. She sat across from me, working on unrolling her sandwich. Once it was freed from its wrapping, she took a big bite.

I couldn't tell her I'd gone out to a club with my mystery man, mostly because she'd then ask why I hadn't invited her. She invited me places every weekend even though I always said no. That party had been the first and only time I'd accepted.

"Uh" was all I got out, then I stopped to think. Not only could I not tell her about the club, but I also couldn't tell her that Creed had kept me up all night Friday afterward because we'd just exchanged *I love yous* and he'd wanted to make me lose my damn mind with an insane number of orgasms.

Nope. Definitely couldn't tell her any of that.

So, in the end I simply said, "Not really. Worked on some homework. Nothing exciting. What did you do?" I scooped up a few croutons and brought them to my mouth. Seriously, there was hardly anything better than some croutons with ranch drizzled over them. So crunchy. So delicious.

"Ah, actually nothing. It was a quiet weekend for me. What was weird was that my roommate hung around all weekend. I think she broke up with her boyfriend, or they're having a fight or something. It was awkward." Beth took another bite of her sandwich, and then she turned her head to gaze out of the windows next to us.

The cafeteria portion of the student union was beside a literal wall of windows; you could see everyone walking by outside on the sidewalk, along with getting a read on the current weather. Hint: it still rained pretty damn hard.

"I hope this rain slows down soon," she said. "I didn't bring a jacket today."

That was when I noticed she wasn't wearing one. Not even a hoodie. Just an off the shoulder light sweater that, I'd bet anything, was a bitch and a half when it got soaked. It probably added twenty pounds when it was wet.

"Your dorm's not too far away. You could cut through buildings," I offered a solution.

"Nah. I'll just camp out here. If it keeps up, I'll skip class." Beth shrugged. She wasn't as anal as I was; I didn't like missing any classes, mostly because with my loans, I knew I was paying for them. And if I was paying for them, I would get my money's worth.

We finished eating, but unlike Beth, I refused to skip class, so I headed out in the rain. I, however, did think ahead and brought a small umbrella with me, so the rain didn't affect me too much. If it was windy and rainy at the same time... that was when I'd have a problem. Thankfully, today the rain wasn't coming down at an angle from the wind.

My afternoon classes passed quickly, and by the time the final one let out, it wasn't raining anymore, so I could fold up the umbrella and stick it in the side of my bag as I walked home. My mood was good; I was still flying high after the weekend.

I mean, I had to be good, right? Creed loved me. It still felt surreal to think about.

But my good mood didn't last long. As I rounded the block to Creed's place, I stopped when I saw someone standing near the guard to the front door of the building. A woman. She was getting all up in his face too, yelling at him—though what she was saying, I couldn't hear due to the traffic on the road.

My mood instantly soured when I saw who it was: Hailee. And, unlike me, she hadn't been braving the weather today. She looked like she'd spent the entire day fluffing herself up, doing her makeup, and practicing her strut in four-inch heels.

I didn't want to walk up to them or walk past her; she'd see me, even if I pretended not to notice her. I simply froze, not knowing what to do. And, anyway, I didn't want to see her

again. Knowing she'd been with Creed... knowing she was basically a high-end escort was something that filled me with disdain.

Not for her profession, but for the fact she'd been with Creed.

I guess Creed wasn't the only one who got jealous.

Well, either way, I had to get inside. Best just to get it over with, I guess. So I gathered up my courage and walked toward the front of the grand high-rise, holding my head up as I approached. The guard, I noticed, was unaffected by Hailee's screams and tantrums. He appeared unbothered entirely.

"Goddamn it," Hailee was busy saying, stomping her heel on the pavement. "Let me in, you asshole! I've been inside before—"

"Yes, you had authorization to come in," he spoke, keeping a bored expression as he explained, probably not for the first time, "but now you don't, so you're not allowed in. I don't make the rules. I just enforce them."

She opened her mouth to argue with him more, but he added, "It's private property, Miss. The owners make the rules. Now go, before I call the cops on you."

Hailee let out a shriek of annoyance, turning on her heel after flicking the guy off... and she turned right toward me. The moment her cat eyes saw me, the expression on her face changed. I was ten feet away, and she slunk over to me, giving her hips an added sway—though to whose benefit, I didn't know.

"Why, if it isn't you," Hailee spoke, flipping her wavy blond hair over to a single shoulder, making its length appear more voluminous. "What was your name again?"

I should ignore her, walk around her, not answer her, but I found myself whispering, "Taylor." Maybe because she had taken on an authoritative tone with me; she was kind of scary. I didn't know how that guy had stood there while she screamed in his face and acted like she was no more than a fly buzzing around his head.

She placed one hand on her hip, giving me a smile with full, red lips. Her blue eyes were surrounded by a smoky gray color and fake lashes. She was beautiful; I'd give her that. She knew how to accentuate her features. She wore tight leggings that showed off her long, thin legs and a light pink shirt that dipped low on her cleavage, showing just the faintest glimpses of a lacey bra.

"Taylor," she purred out my name, smiling at me like she was the Cheshire Cat. "That's right. You're Creed's sister." She took a step toward me, cocking her head at me. "How is he doing? It's been so long since I've seen him." She let out an exaggerated sigh, reaching up to touch the tips of my hair, running my hair between her fingers. "I miss him so much."

Of course she was here to try to see Creed. It shouldn't surprise me. She didn't seem like the kind of woman who took no for an answer, not when she wanted something. And right now, Creed was that something.

"He's fine," I said, wishing I could have the guts to step away from her hand that still played with my hair, wishing I could walk away from her. But I couldn't. Something about her had me frozen in place.

"Is he?" Hailee's immaculately-plucked eyebrows came together in mock concern. "He was always so lonely, in that big place all by himself. Not really a people person, either. I do worry about him." She paused, her stare taking me in: my baggy hoodie, the bag over my shoulder. "Oh, but he's got you now. Still, there's only so much a sister can do, you must admit. Every man needs a woman he's not related to, so he can... well, you know."

Maybe I shouldn't have said it, but the words left me before I thought better of them: "He's my stepbrother."

A muscle on her face twitched, and that perfect smile of hers faded somewhat. "He's your stepbrother? Of course, he is. You two look nothing alike, other than the brown hair—and everyone has brown hair." She snickered at that, as if insulting me and Creed and everybody with brown hair at the same time.

But then she had an idea, because she became her smooth-talking self once more. She took a step closer to me, lowering her voice, “Why don’t you bring me inside, hmm? I want to see Creed again.”

“I don’t think he’s home—”

“That’s okay, honey. You and I could find some way to occupy ourselves until he gets back.” Hailee dropped her hand from my hair, drawing her long nails down my arm. With the hoodie on me, I couldn’t feel those nails touching my skin. If I had, I didn’t doubt I would be unable to do much else other than shiver. “And besides, guys always have a thing for their stepsisters. I don’t think he’ll mind walking in and seeing us... or joining us.”

I couldn’t help it; my cheeks burned. This woman... she’d left Creed on such an awful note—he’d kicked her out, more like it—and yet she was here, trying to get inside. Trying to seduce me, I guess, in order to come inside with me?

She was gorgeous, yes, but I didn’t swing that way. And, even if I did, I loved Creed.

“Um, I don’t think so,” I spoke, sounding awkward as ever. Before she could say anything else—and surely she would; she didn’t seem like the kind of person who ever took no for an answer—I added, “I have to go.” And then I walked around her, hustling to the front door.

Hailee called out to me, “Wait! Ugh, come on!” She tried to catch up to me, but the guard near the door quickly stepped in between us. She started to huff and puff, swearing at him again.

The guard was unaffected by her outburst, and he turned his head toward me, giving me a nod as if saying, *I’ve got it from here*. I would hope so; it was his job, although I did feel a little bad that I’d left him with Hailee—but to be fair, she’d been trying to get inside the building long before I got there.

Such a switch from how venomous she’d sounded when Creed had thrown her out. The way she’d talked about me, like she knew she was better than me and she hated me for simply

existing, was vivid in my mind. And yet, just now she'd acted all sugary and sweet to try to get what she wanted. The whole you caught more flies with honey thing... even if it hadn't worked for her today.

I replayed the scene in my head as I headed to the elevator. I didn't know if Creed was upstairs or not. If he was, did he get notified anytime someone tried to come in to see him? Did he know Hailee was out there?

And then a dark, pessimistic part of me wondered if she kept being so persistent, if Creed would eventually get tired of me and want his hired body back. I mean, she had to be good at sex if it was her job. I was nowhere near an expert. What if —

No. I couldn't let myself think like that. I wouldn't. If I did, I might ruin what Creed and I had, and for the first time in my life, I was totally content with where I was. I didn't want anything to change, and I definitely never wanted to ruin it by being so insecure.

When I reached the apartment, or condo, or whatever the hell you were supposed to call it, I found Creed wasn't home. I went straight to my room, sighing as I lay down on my bed. Getting my phone out, I texted Creed, asking when he'd be home.

*Had to run to work for a meeting* was his text back after a minute or two. *Coming home now. Want me to grab dinner?*

To say I had no appetite right now would be the year's biggest understatement, and yet if I told him to grab something, he'd take longer to get home... which meant I'd have more time to practice in my head how I'd tell him about the whole Hailee thing.

I mean, I had to, right? I had to tell him she was trying to get him back. I didn't want to keep the confrontation a secret from him. I didn't want to keep any secrets from Creed.

*Yeah*, I texted back, *please*. I did a quick search in Google for food places downtown. I told him I had a hankering for food from the place with reviews that said the chefs were slow.



Any extra time was good. I sent him the link to the place, telling him what I wanted from their online menu.

He texted me back: *Okay*, and then it was a waiting game.

I really wasn't good at confrontation... although I didn't think that's what I would call this. I didn't know what this was, other than plain old complicated. From what I understood, Hailee had been a mere business arrangement for Creed; Creed never had feelings for her. He'd just, you know, paid her for her time once a month, to relieve certain, uh, stressors of his.

Sex. He'd paid her for sex because he had no life outside of his work and didn't care to try dating. That was the truth of it.

But even though Creed had viewed it as a business transaction, it was clear Hailee had come to see it as something else. Maybe she'd come to have real feelings for Creed, and she'd been blindsided the day he'd told her it was over and he was done paying for her company.

Did she love him? I wondered, or did she simply love the money? A lot of people would get used to the money. A lot of people would also do anything for a big fat paycheck. Money ran the world; it certainly ran this country.

There was nothing inherently wrong with money itself; it was nice to spend and not have to worry about going negative in your bank account, I'd be the first to admit. Going on a shopping spree with Creed had been more fun than I'd thought it would be.

But, that said, I did not understand the people who lied and cheated and stole, all to get more money for themselves. The people who would do anything to increase their riches; the selfish pricks of society. I wasn't saying Hailee was one of them, but it did make me wonder if her persistence was about Creed or more about the money she no longer had coming in.

I didn't know how to view that woman or her actions. I'd only met her twice. She had some balls though, to try to

seduce me into letting her come up with me. I bet if I told Creed about that part, he'd get pissed.

It took Creed just over an hour to get back with the food, and we sat together in the kitchen, side by side, eating in silence. He wore a dark gray suit, no tie with it. His stubble-lined jaw looked as though he'd trimmed it earlier.

He looked good. Of course he looked good. Creed always did. It was effortless for him.

Creed was the one who broke the silence first, "How is it?"

I blinked. "What?" My mouth was full, the word barely got out, and when I met his dark-eyed stare, I realized he was asking about the food. Ah, right. I worked to swallow what was in my mouth, saying, "It's good."

It was a pressed Italian sandwich with deep-fried homemade fries. Definitely not the healthiest option out there, but it really was delicious. I assumed they took so long fulfilling orders because everything they did was homemade instead of out of a bag from the freezer. Even the bread was said to be cooked in house, early every day, before they opened up to the public.

"Good," Creed said.

"How was your meeting?"

Now it was his turn to say, "What?"

"Work. You said you had to go in for a meeting," I reminded him, watching as he slowly nodded. I trusted him; I didn't think he'd do anything fishy. I didn't think he'd go behind my back and lie to me about something. Still... the expression on his face made me wonder if there was something about his work he wasn't telling me.

"Oh, it was..." Creed shook his head, his mouth thinning into a line. "Just the boss reminding everyone about certain requirements of accepting job listings."

"What does that mean?"

“It means if you accept a job listing, you’re not allowed to refuse it after. If you do... you run the risk of being fired.” Creed paused, his jaw grinding as he got a far-off look on his face. “And being fired from the firm is always, let’s just say, *messy*.”

Ah. I guess I understood why refusing a job after already accepting it would look terrible on the company, why it would get you fired. If you didn’t want the job to begin with, you shouldn’t have accepted it. But then, I didn’t work with him, so I didn’t know the ins and outs of the place. Heck, I wasn’t even sure what the company was called. Creed was very secretive about it, but I supposed that was because it was all about security.

Creed brought me out of my wandering thoughts to ask, “How was your day? I heard from the front desk that someone was trying to get in to see me today.” He didn’t sound too thrilled about it.

“Yeah, Hailee was here when I got back from class,” I told him. “It looked like she’d been yelling at the guard at the front for a while. But he was unfazed, which was pretty impressive. She... I think she wants to try to get back with you, or redo the arrangement you had before.” Just saying it aloud made my tongue feel swollen, like I didn’t want to say it.

The look Creed gave me then was one of annoyance. Not at me, but at Hailee. He frowned and shook his head once, saying, “She let me have a week or so of peace, but then she started calling me at least five times a day. I thought blocking her number would be the end of it, but apparently I was wrong.”

So she had contacted him before, and he’d never told me. “Why didn’t you tell me she was trying to get in touch with you?”

“She’s none of your concern. She’s none of mine now, either. What we had was not a relationship—and she knows that. Why she has it in her head that things will go back to the way they were before, I don’t know, but they’re not.”

Creed got up, moving to stand beside me, his tall frame towering over my sitting figure. His arms caged me in against the island. “You’re the only one for me,” he told me, his husky voice a whisper, his breath hot on my face. “You and only you, Taylor. You don’t have to worry about her or anyone else, I promise you. You’re the only one I want.”

The more Creed said, the more I melted against him. Turning away from my food, I tilted my head back and met his lips with mine, tasting both his dinner and the truth of his words. Any time I felt his mouth on mine, any doubts lingering in me faded instantly.

When he pulled his mouth off mine, moving to start cleaning up his takeout container, I said, “I don’t think she’ll give up any time soon. I think she’s going to keep trying to come in. She, uh... let’s just say she’s willing to do anything to get inside and see you again.”

That got Creed to pause in what he was doing, chocolate eyes on me. “What does that mean?”

“She tried to come in with me, said we could... find other ways to entertain ourselves if you weren’t home.” I kept the part about him joining us to myself; besides, I figured he could put two and two together on that one himself.

Creed didn’t act shocked. And, for some reason, he didn’t get all growly and jealous, like he did when another guy was in the picture. He simply rolled his eyes and resumed cleaning up. “That does sound like something she would do.” Once his trash was thrown out and he was washing his hands, his back straightened and he slowly turned around to face me. “Although... perhaps she does need a lesson. I don’t want her bothering us forever. She needs a lesson that’ll stick with her for a long time.”

I had zero ideas what he meant by that, but I had the feeling his lesson wouldn’t be something a teacher would do in class with kids... “What are you planning?” I had to ask, mostly because Creed adopted an almost sly expression.

He came over to me, wove his hand through my hair and pulled my head back. “Trust me, Taylor, I think you’ll enjoy

the lesson, too.” He finished the statement with another kiss—this one deep and hard.

Creed said nothing else about it, which left me to wonder all night.

The next day rolled around, and Creed was still tight-lipped about his supposed lesson to Hailee. I honestly couldn't think of what it would be, but I also hadn't really dealt with Hailee much, so I wouldn't know what kind of lesson would stick in her head the most.

Honestly, the only thing that woman seemed to care about was sex, so I didn't know what else would stick.

I went to class, did my best to pay attention and not think about it, but it grew more and more difficult as the hours wore on and morning turned into afternoon. Beth had to hit the library during her free time, so I didn't see her at all. Besides the whole Hailee thing, it was a pretty normal day.

As normal as a day could be, given how much my life had changed lately.

I still couldn't get over it. When I sat down and thought about how much everything had changed, it blew my mind every single time. I guess it was true: you never knew what life would throw at you. I liked to think that, considering everything, I'd handled it all pretty well.

Classes ended, and I headed home, still not knowing what to expect. When I got back, I found Creed had cleaned the place up. He even had candles lit in the kitchen, on the surfaces in the living room.

When I saw the state of the place, I went searching for Creed. He was in his room, changing into a dark suit. All black. Black on black on black; and on him, it looked damn good. The suit made his shoulders appear wider, and the pants clung to his legs in just the right way.

Let's just say the pants made his ass look amazing.

“What’s all this?” I asked, my gaze taking its time in checking Creed out. Anyone with eyes would drool over Creed. He was so good-looking, especially in that all-black suit, that he could get anyone on their backs for him—anyone, and still he wanted me.

“I left you something on your bed. I picked it up today. Wear it,” Creed ordered. “She should be here in an hour, but if I know her, she’ll show up early.” He walked over to me, adjusting his cufflinks before setting his hands on my hips, giving me a commanding look. “I want you looking your best, Taylor.”

My best? What the heck was he going on about?

Wait a moment.

“You invited Hailee here?” I couldn’t stop myself from sounding incredulous... mostly because I was. With how angry he’d been at her before, I definitely didn’t think his lesson would involve inviting her back into his home. *Our* home, now.

“Yes. It’s necessary to bring her here, and the easiest way to do that is to act like she’s welcome and invite her.” His fingers tightened on my waist, reminding me of just how close we were. “I’m going to need you to do everything I say when she’s here. Trust me.” It was both a command and a plea.

One of his hands lifted from my waist, moving to my jaw. His thumb and finger hooked around my chin, angling my head back and forcing me to gaze into his dark brown stare. “Trust me,” he said again, his voice much lower than it had been seconds before. The urgent way he said it, as if a part of him feared I didn’t trust him—or wouldn’t—was sexy in a way it shouldn’t be.

Then again, everything involving Creed was sexy.

I didn’t know what he had planned. I was morbidly curious, and yet a part of me grew anxious. I didn’t like Hailee; if I never saw her again, it’d be too soon. But here she’d be, in less than an hour—and I had to make myself presentable before then. Creed wanted me to look my best, and

I'd be lying if I said I was okay with looking like a potato in front of someone like Hailee.

That woman was movie star gorgeous, someone who oozed sex appeal with every strut. It didn't come that easy to me. I had to work for it, work for my confidence and my beauty. I was never one to think I was beautiful, but if Creed would pick me over someone as pretty as Hailee... that was the biggest confidence booster ever.

"I do," I whispered back. "I trust you."

His lips curled into a smirk, and he bent down to lay an uncharacteristically gentle kiss on my lips. "Good," he murmured against me. "Now, go get ready." Creed released me, and he continued to smirk as he watched me go.

I wandered over to my bedroom, dropping my bag on the floor as I spotted a long bag laying on my bed. I walked over to it, reached for it and picked it up. The bag was thick and black, but I didn't need X-ray vision to know what was inside. My other hand went for the zipper, and I slowly undid it, revealing the lone item in the bag.

A dress. All black, matching Creed's suit. A satin fabric, with small shoulder straps. It looked like it was made to be tight, a seam directly beneath the chest area, built-in pads included—no bra necessary. When I pulled it out of the bag, I saw why.

The back dipped low. Like, way past the shoulder blades. Probably halfway down your back, exposing most of your spine.

Holding it up, I saw how short the dress was, too. It ended just above the knee. Not overly revealing, minus the V in the back, but sexy at the same time.

Creed got me this dress today, because he wanted me to wear it tonight, when Hailee came up? *What kind of lesson is he going to teach?* I wondered, but I was past the point of saying no to Creed, so I went into my bathroom and got changed.

He wanted me looking my best? I'd give him my best. My makeup game might not be as on-point as Hailee's, but I didn't think he liked the Instagram model look too much. I gave my hair a gentle wave, and then did a little bit of mascara to make my lashes thicker and longer, along with a bit of gray eyeshadow.

It didn't take me too long to get dressed, and when I was done, I stood back and looked at my handiwork in the mirror.

Damn. I did a little spin, checking out the sharp dip in the back. What looked to be an almost terrifyingly exposing part of the dress, it actually looked a heck of a lot better on. The dip stopped about three quarters of the way down my back, and with the way the dress hugged the rest of my body, it made me look sophisticated and sexy at the same time.

Creed definitely picked well; it wasn't something I would've chosen for myself off the rack, but he'd somehow known I'd look killer in it.

And I did. With my hair wavy, my eyes done up a little bit, I thought I looked great.

I grabbed the heels I'd worn to the club with Creed last weekend, but I didn't put them on. Instead, I held them as I tiptoed out of my room, hesitant only in that I didn't know whether Hailee had arrived while I was busy getting ready.

She hadn't.

Creed was pacing the length of the kitchen, but when he saw me walk out, he stopped. His jaw dropped a bit, and his eyes fell to my feet, slow to rise and take me in. His stare went beyond simply checking me out; hunger laced itself inside that stare, telling me just how quickly I could make him go from existing to ravenous.

He swept over to me, taking me in his arms. "I knew you'd look sinful in that dress," he murmured out the words, masterfully moving me so my back was against the island. "And I was right."

I inhaled sharply when my spine felt the cold stone countertop touching it—or maybe I inhaled because of Creed's



sudden closeness. His body blocked out the world; all I could see was his black suit, and when I tilted my head back, I got a whiff of his musky, manly scent. That scent filled my lungs and made my heart skip a beat.

“I can’t wait to take that dress off you,” Creed went on, his hands roaming up my sides, stopping only when they cupped the front of the dress, my tits in the palms of his hands. Only the fabric of the dress sat between his warm hands and my skin, and yet I still sighed, as if I could feel them on me all the same.

It took everything in me to speak when I was damn near overcome by a need for Creed, “What exactly is the plan? All you told me is that Hailee is coming and you wanted me to look good. Why? What kind of lesson are you going to teach her?”

One of Creed’s hands lifted to swipe some of my hair out of my face, tucking it behind an ear, while his other hand fell from my chest. “It’s not just going to be me, Taylor. *We’re* the teachers tonight.”

“What could we...” I stopped, unable to process just what he was talking about. I didn’t understand what we could teach her together. Heck, I didn’t understand any of this. Inviting her up here, creating a sexy atmosphere with all the candles and the dim lighting, wanting me to look good; I just didn’t get it.

Creed took my hand, pulling me along as he said not another word. He brought me to the hall, and we headed to his room. I certainly hoped we wouldn’t be bringing Hailee into his bedroom...

But then, as we stopped in front of his wide-open bedroom door, I saw something that most definitely wasn’t there before, something he had to have brought in while I was busy changing and doing my hair and makeup.

A chair sat facing the bed. I didn’t need him to tell me who the chair was for. My cheeks burned when the realization hit me, and I whipped my head up to look at Creed. It shouldn’t surprise me; he’d gone bananas when he’d seen me with that

college guy... and he'd made him watch him kiss me and make me come with his fingers to teach him a lesson.

Apparently, Hailee's lesson was going to be similar.

"When we're done, there will be no doubt in her mind that I am all yours," Creed spoke, his voice husky and low, telling me I was exactly right in my assumption that he would make her watch us on the bed.

"What... what makes you think she'll stay to watch?"

"I put restraints underneath the chair. Once she's seated, I'm going to pull them out and use them."

"Creed—"

"What? Watching how I am with you... it'll piss her off so much, she'll be out of both our lives for good. She should be grateful we're giving her this lesson—the lesson could be a lot worse." He looked away, his mouth thinning into a line at that.

I had no idea what he meant by that last part, but I didn't ask. I supposed, when Hailee's main language was sex, sex had to be involved for it to sink in, one way or another. Creed was lucky I loved him so much; I wouldn't agree to have sex in front of someone with anyone else.

Right then, Creed's cell buzzed, and he pulled it out to check it. One moment later, he said, "She's downstairs. Very early, like I suspected." His dark gaze snapped up, boring holes into me with his intensity as he added, "Wait in here. I'm going to greet her and bring her in."

He typed a quick message back, I assumed to someone downstairs, and he slipped his phone back into his pocket. He took me by the face, his hands practically swallowing up my cheeks as he angled my head back. "I will be right back," he murmured, and then he kissed me long and hard, a fierce sort of kiss that took hold of my soul and refused to let it go until his mouth pulled off mine.

I watched him leave, and once he was out of sight, I went to sit on the edge of his bed, careful not to wrinkle the dress too much in the process. I then remembered the heels and shot

up to go put them on, but I was back in his room in seconds, heaving an uneven sigh as I sat down once more.

Inside my chest, my heart beat fast. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about this. I never, ever thought I'd do anything like this, and I still didn't quite understand why we needed to do it... but if Creed thought it was the only way to get Hailee to leave us alone, what choice did we have?

I trusted Creed. I loved him. I'd do anything for him, including letting him use me to make a point to another woman.

It was kind of taboo, in a way. A little exciting, being an exhibitionist. That's what it was called, right? Being a voyeur was when you liked to watch, and being an exhibitionist was when you liked to put on a show. Creed definitely had some exhibition in his veins; the night in the club and when I'd brought that boy here were evidence enough.

The seconds felt like minutes, and the minutes felt like hours as I waited for Creed to return. My palms were a little sweaty; I didn't know how exactly this was going to go, how long it would take or how... let's just say *involved* it would be, but if I knew Creed, it'd be more than overkill.

When I heard the door to the place open and shut, I got to my feet, standing beside the bed as I fiddled with my fingers. I overheard Hailee's voice say, "I'm surprised you gave in so easily. I figured I'd have to hound you for a while. Does this mean you're done playing babysitter to that adorable stepsister of yours, or is she still around? She's so plain. I couldn't believe she's related to you, but a stepsister makes a lot more sense."

I resisted my urge to roll my eyes, my hands clenching into fists. Even now, I still let Hailee get to me. Insulting me, looking down on me; she wasn't a very nice person, and I doubted that she had any friends of her own. Just business arrangements, as Creed had called them. Clients. A person like that only called people friends when they could do things for her.

Obviously, I didn't like her.

“Do not insult her,” Creed’s commanding voice filled the air. I could tell based on how much louder his voice was that they were coming closer; they were walking down the hall now.

“Oh, so she’s still here, then? Pity, but fine. I’ll play nice.” Hailee’s tone dripped a mixture of annoyance and disdain, as if playing nice was the last thing she wanted to do. Still, a smile was on her face as she strutted into Creed’s room.

That smile faded the instant she saw me in the room, and she didn’t even try to hide her attitude when she whirled around to Creed and demanded, “What the hell is going on? What’s she doing here?” She folded her arms over her chest, cocking a hip. “My offer to play yesterday doesn’t apply today—unless you’re willing to make it up to me. It’s been hard these last few weeks.” Trying to get more money out of Creed, I guess?

Creed gave her a tight-lipped smirk. “That’s not why I brought you up here. This isn’t a business meeting, Hailee. It’s a social call. Sit.” He gestured to the chair facing the bed, which, until that moment, Hailee hadn’t even noticed.

“What the hell is this?” she asked, her arms falling to her sides as she flipped her long, blond hair over her shoulder. She wore a tight red dress, looking less sophisticated than me, but still just as beautiful. Her face was made up in perfectly contoured makeup, like always, and her lips had that perpetual pucker.

“Once you get comfortable, I’ll show you. I suggest you sit,” Creed spoke, a low growl accompanying his words. The hair on the back of my neck prickled at hearing him use such a menacing tone with her. Only a fool wouldn’t listen to him.

Hailee let out a disbelieving chuckle. “I don’t think I’m going to—”

That was all Creed needed to hear, apparently, because within the blink of an eye, he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her over to the chair. He forced her to sit down, pushing her ass down on the chair as he knelt in front of her and yanked something out from beneath it.

“What are you doing? What—” Even Hailee couldn’t stop him from doing what he did next, and that was fix her wrists to the chair’s armrests. Her shock at the turn of events made her initially not struggle, but once she realized what was happening, she started to yank at her wrists. “Let me go. What the hell is this? What are you doing?”

I was about to ask Creed if this was perhaps going a little overboard—you know, too much—but Creed answered her before I got the chance to speak, “You know exactly what I’m doing. Don’t be an idiot.”

As he fixated her ankles to the feet of the chair, she said, “I’ll call the cops—”

“No, we both know you won’t.” Creed sounded totally sure of that, and I had no idea why. Maybe because she was an escort and she couldn’t tell the police why she’d come up here in the first place? Or maybe it was due to the fact that Creed had what were probably multiple instances of her stalking him and trying to get into the building that he could use against her.

Once Creed was done, he straightened himself out and walked over to me, setting a hand on my lower back. Hailee watched with daggers in her blue eyes, the hatred she held for me only growing stronger.

“This is fucking ridiculous,” she said. “What is the point? You two going to fuck while making me watch? Please. That’s child’s play.”

“I think you underestimate my abilities. You’re going to be here all night... and perhaps all day tomorrow. I’ll decide when to let you go,” Creed growled out, his body turning toward mine.

My shoulder leaned against him. With one hand on my back, his other lifted to my stomach. He cradled me against him, looking squarely at me while I stared at Hailee across from us. She sat maybe five feet away; there wasn’t much distance at all between the chair and the bed.

Hailee barked out a laugh, but that laugh died toward the end, becoming something so obviously fake it was pointless.

Creed was slow to turn his face toward Hailee, and I'd bet anything he glared hard at her. "You know I mean every single word I say. Unlike you, I don't say things just to hear myself talk. By the time you leave this room, you will understand that you're nothing to me. You never were anything. You let yourself crave my wealth and me—maybe you thought you were becoming something more—but you never were."

Her jaw ground. "No need to be a bitch about it. Why don't you just let me go and we can both move on?"

Creed released me, moving to stand before Hailee. He was slow to sink to his knees, keeping about a foot in between them; he did not move to touch her, thankfully. I didn't want to see any part of him touching her. "See, I tried that. I tried to let you go, but you kept coming around—and each time you did, you made a scene... and you were rude to Taylor."

He stood, giving Hailee his back as he returned to me, hands taking my hips and jerking me toward him, my chest colliding with his strong, lean body. "This girl is mine," his voice growled out, low and consuming. "No one will talk to her like that. I won't let them." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "That includes you, in case that was still unclear."

I couldn't even grin at the attitude he gave back to her; I was too busy gazing up at the contours of his face, the hard angle of his jaw and the dark stubble lining it. I had blinders on when it came to Creed; I was so in love with this man, I didn't even care that this might technically be considered kidnapping.

But he wasn't worried about it, so I wouldn't be, either.

Creed's dark eyes were on me in the next moment, locking me in place as he whispered, "Let's show her how real sparks fly." He'd barely gotten the words out before his mouth crashed down to mine, swallowing up any reply I might've had with his demanding kiss.

I closed my eyes, surrendering to everything Creed was, to all of the feelings rising up within me. I let the hunger in me loose, let the passion and heat inside me boil over. I let him take the lead, more than willing to follow him to the ends of the earth.

And today, the ends of the earth just happened to be his bed.

In front of an audience of one.

## Chapter Eighteen – Creed

Taylor leaned into the kiss, her small body pressing hard against my frame as I took command of her mouth. I would make every inch of her body mine today and tonight... and even tomorrow, if that's how long it took. And not once would I let Hailee out of that chair. Not to eat, not to piss, not to take a shit. If she wanted out, all she had to do was let the lesson sink in that thick skull of hers.

As I kissed Taylor, I spun her so that Hailee could see the consuming kiss herself. It must've been quite the sight, because she let out an aggravated huff of a breath and asked, "What do you want me to say? Do you want me to apologize to her, tell her I'm sorry for everything I said?" She scoffed. "Please. I knew something was going on between you two the first time I met her. This doesn't bother me at all. I'm very comfortable here."

We'd see how long she kept that up. Sooner or later, her body would be numb, and that chair wouldn't feel nearly as comfortable as it did right now. And that said nothing of her pride, which I was certain would nag her to the point where she couldn't keep calm any longer.

I ignored her completely, putting all of my focus into the kiss. I slipped my tongue past Taylor's lips, and she let out a soft moan into the kiss the very second my tongue touched hers. Her body pressed against mine as hard as it possibly could given the fact I didn't have her pinned against anything. Certain parts of me were already growing heated and hard; it took more than it should've to take it slow.

Taylor and I had all the time in the world to make the point known to Hailee.

I didn't want Hailee. I wanted Taylor, now and forever, and by fuck, Hailee would know it—and if she refused to see the truth, the truth that was right before her eyes, she'd never leave that fucking chair.



Taylor melted against me, clinging to me, her body whispering to mine, her lips a perfect match for mine. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that she could stand here all night, letting me kiss her, letting me steal from her lungs and breathe the same air—but I had other things in mind.

I tore my mouth off Taylor, spinning her so that her front faced Hailee on the chair. My hands gripped her sides roughly, bunching up the black dress somewhat in the process, and I brought my lips to her neck. Past her hair, I showered the tender crook of her neck with nips and kisses, drawing out soft, fluttering moans from her.

I knew exactly how we looked. The dress I'd chosen for Taylor made her look like a bombshell, a kind of effortless beauty Hailee could only hope to attain one day. It fit her petite body like a glove, as if it was made for her and her alone. Together, we were one in all black.

My hands started to roam all over Taylor's body, moving along the fabric of the dress as I continued to shower her neck with attention. I was rock hard now, but I was in no hurry to take off my clothes. We'd be here for a while; ultimately, it was up to me to decide just how long that was.

When my hands cupped Taylor's tits over the dress, Hailee rolled her eyes and muttered something under her breath, shifting her gaze away from us as she tried in vain to pull at her restraints.

I lifted my mouth off Taylor's neck, telling Hailee, "I would watch if I were you. I have no qualms about leaving you tied up on that chair forever." And, beyond that, I wasn't afraid of Hailee coming after me. She couldn't call the cops. She wouldn't be able to get anyone to come to her aid, not now, and not after I let her go. To her, I was untouchable.

It helped having money, of course, but being member of the Guild was another part of it.

The resentment was plain on Hailee's face as her eyes flicked back to us, taking in the way I held onto Taylor. Only when those blue eyes returned to us did I lower my lips back to that tender neck and resume the show.

Although, it wasn't just a show. No, of course it wasn't. When it came to Taylor and me, well, it could never be *just* anything. Fate had a hand in this, and I would never walk away from her again. She was mine, my everything, my future, my world. I didn't care that relationships that weren't between two guildmates often didn't work out; we would. We would be the exception to the rule, Taylor and me.

My hands dropped from her chest, moving to the bottom hem of the dress. It was a shorter dress, so with a little bending of my knees, I was able to yank the hem up a bit so one of my hands could slip between her thighs. She had panties on, but I didn't go to move them aside; I simply stroked her over the panties, eliciting a different kind of moan from her throat.

Taylor leaned her head back against me, short, erratic sighs escaping her as my fingers tweaked her clit over her panties. Her hips ground on my hand, her body's way of telling me she wanted more.

My fingers moved aside the panties, just enough to run along the slick folds of her lower lips, enough to touch that clit unhindered, and I was thanked with a louder moan. My other hand curled around her neck, forcing her to turn her head to the side, and I brought my lips to hers once more while still giving expert attention to that eager clit.

"All right, all right," Hailee spoke, struggling against the restraints. "I get it, okay? I'll leave you two weirdos alone, just let me go." She already sounded as if she had no more patience, like she was done with this, checked out completely.

But she had another thing coming if she thought I'd release her right now. No, this show was just getting started.

After a minute, Taylor had to pull her mouth from mine to pant. My fingers on her clit had become too much; I could feel her body tensing up in all the right places, her muscles locking of their own accord. Her eyelids slammed shut, and within another moment, she let out a loud cry of pleasure, riding my hand to her completion.

Her first orgasm of the night, but it wouldn't be her last.

I ignored Hailee and what she'd said as I pulled my hand away from the apex between Taylor's thighs, taking her around my bed and sitting her on the edge of it. I locked gazes with Taylor, noting the hunger in those green depths as I sank to my knees before her. I took off her heels one by one, tossing them aside, and then I reached for those panties and pulled them off, sliding them down her legs and over her ankles and feet. Once the panties were off, I let them drop to the floor.

It was like Hailee wasn't there, like it was just another night. Like we'd gotten back from a date somewhere fancy, and while we were out, we'd been fighting our urges. Now, we could let those urges free, let them take us and devour us whole.

I spread Taylor's knees, exposing her most private part to me. Those pink folds were slick with her arousal, her clit swollen and still very needy. I didn't hesitate as I brought my face between her thighs, taking my mouth to that needy nub.

The sounds that came from Taylor after that were worlds different. More desperate, with more power behind them. One of her hands tangled itself in my hair, tugging softly as her hips began to move. Hailee might've said something then, but I didn't hear what. Didn't care. I was too focused on the delicious taste of Taylor's arousal on my tongue.

"Oh," Taylor spoke the word in a breathy rush, her hips rocking back and forth, as if she was on my cock and not my mouth. "Oh, God."

I couldn't help but smirk against her apex. God had nothing to do with this. It was all me, but if she wanted to cry out for him, I wouldn't stop her. As my mouth moved to her clit, I lifted a hand between her legs, slipping a finger inside of that sweet pussy. It went in easily; my girl was so very aroused right now.

I sucked on her clit, using my tongue in the way I knew she liked. On the right side of it, running over the part of her that had the most nerve endings, the part that made her squirm and cry out, and all the while, I never stopped fucking her with my finger.

She wanted my cock in her, and she wanted it now, but there would be plenty of time for that later. I wanted to hear her come again. I wanted to make Hailee watch Taylor completely unravel for me, watch me shower her body with attention I'd never given to her before.

Hailee had always been a means to an end. Taylor was destiny. There was no fair comparison.

Taylor's thighs tightened around my head, but I didn't let the added pressure stop me from pushing her to her next release. This time, when an orgasm swept through her body, she cried out a muffled sound, her inner core tensing around my finger. I kept up my mouth work on her clit, making the orgasm last longer, hit harder. I forced her to ride the orgasm's high as I drew it out for her.

When the orgasm faded, Taylor's hand fell from my head, no longer pulling at my hair. She nearly fell back on the bed; she had to use both arms to prop herself up and keep her top half upright. I withdrew my finger from her pussy, letting her catch her breath—if only for a moment.

As I was slow to pull my face away from her apex, licking my lips, I lifted my gaze, studying her. Taylor's cheeks were flushed, a small line of sweat dotting her hairline. Her chest rose and fell with uneven breaths; even now, she couldn't catch her breath to save her life, and I liked the fact that I was the one who'd brought her to the brink.

Twice, and quite easily, too. How many more times would she come for me today? Tonight? Tomorrow? However long it took... however long I decided to keep Hailee here, a personal prisoner.

I, myself, was burning up in my suit. I supposed I could take a few things off... but I wouldn't get naked. No, this wasn't about giving Hailee a show where I was concerned; I didn't want that girl to be watching *me*. I wanted her to watch *Taylor* as I fucked her, to wish that she was in her place, to know that she would never feel me inside of her ever again.

Was it cruel? Was this whole thing a little insane? Maybe. I supposed most normal people might think it was overboard

and perhaps even illegal to keep someone here against their will and make them watch something like this, but I wasn't a normal person. I was a contract killer, so my moral compass was a little off every now and then.

I got to my feet, standing before Taylor. I reached up to unbutton my suit jacket, taking it off at a measuredly unhurried pace. I let it fall to the floor, unworried about wrinkles. The next thing I did was take off my tie and my shoes. My belt came off next. Everything else I think I'd leave on.

"Come here," I told Taylor, offering her a hand, and I watched her get off the bed with no hesitation, placing her tiny hand in mine. I pulled her closer to me, spinning her so that I got her back. That delicious dip in the dress on her back... let's just say it was a dress I'd want to see her in again.

I ran a finger down her spine, eliciting a sharp inhale of her lungs. She was still pretty unsteady on her feet after two powerful orgasms, but I kept her upright. My hand went for the side of the dress, where the zipper sat, tucked away unseen.

Within seconds, the dress loosened around her body. It loosened enough that her tits spilled out without the need for me to yank the dress all the way down.

But of course, the dress came off after that, and since I'd already taken off her panties and the dress allowed no bra to be worn, Taylor was utterly naked, her back to me and her front angled toward Hailee.

Hailee scoffed, but I could tell there was less heart behind the sound, less attitude. Now she was starting to realize the fact that this wasn't a joke, that she would not be set free until she learned her lesson.

And if, say, she continued to hound me or Taylor after this... let's just say I wouldn't give her another chance like this. Being in the Guild, there were certain perks you couldn't get anywhere else. Every now and then, if you needed to get rid of a body, the Lioness allowed it.

Hailee had better learn her lesson here, or else.

I curled an arm around Taylor's body, snaking it between her breasts and bringing it up to her neck. I didn't squeeze her neck, didn't tighten my grip around it—that was something I'd never do, not after her fucking dad had choked her out—but I held onto her with a firmness that told her she belonged to me. It should be clear to Hailee, too.

I lowered my top half, bringing my mouth to her shoulder, kissing it gently. My other hand rested on her left hip, fingers digging into the skin. I'd be lying if I said my cock wasn't ready to push inside that sweet cunt. I wanted to fuck Taylor like I'd never fucked her before—and then I wanted to do it over and over again until my balls ran dry.

I spoke quietly, “Are you ready for me, Taylor?” I didn't need to ask; I knew she was. After two orgasms, she was practically dripping wet between the thighs, her pussy ready to milk my cock for all it was worth.

Taylor nodded once, apparently unable to speak, but it was enough of an answer for me. I dropped the hand from her neck, pushing her toward the bed once more. She started to climb on top of it, but I stopped her and pulled her back. With her legs on the edge of the bed, knees spread apart, I made her top half bend over. She used her arms to prop herself on the bed, her backside a foot away from my cock. Bent over and ready to take me in.

I ran a hand down her back, curving it along her ass. I squeezed her left cheek, not too hard, but hard enough to leave a mark. Having her on what was basically all fours on the edge of the bed put her at a good height for me. I could stand with my feet flat on the floor and fuck her hard and wild.

So that's what I did.

I unbuttoned my pants, pulled down the zipper, and got myself out. I ran a hand along my length, my hard, veiny cock ready to feel that tight warmth wrapped around it. Taking a step forward, I guided the tip of my cock to the entrance of her core, and then I pushed my hips against her, driving my cock

inside her bit by bit until she'd taken every inch of me that she could.

When I was fully in her, I groaned and shut my eyes, reveling in the heat of her pussy, its tightness, the way it felt so fucking perfect around my length. Her body had been made for mine, of that there could be no question.

The world faded away. The third person in the room ceased to exist. In that moment, all there was was Taylor and me.

I got to work.

I started out slow, drawing my hips back at an agonizingly slow pace before pumping back inside her. Her body would take everything I gave it, and in the end, I didn't doubt it would want more. Taylor always did. We were both ravenous when it came to the other, all of our restraint lost to the past.

With both hands on her sides, I fucked her like I was an expert on the subject, like I'd been born to do this, to be with her. My whole body swayed with the slow fucking, my skin hot. Suddenly I wished I wasn't wearing so many clothes, but I refused to take them off. Not with Hailee here.

I might've been moving my hips slowly, but that didn't mean Taylor was quiet. Every so often she let out a sound of pure pleasure, her fingers tensing up on the sheet under her. She arched her back, moving her body in a way that let her take more of me inside her. She was my little minx right now, and I knew she'd be down for whatever I wanted.

Let's just say I had an idea. We hadn't worked our way up to it yet, but it would teach Hailee a lesson, and Taylor would enjoy it, too.

When I opened my eyes, I took hold of her hair in my hand, tugging her head back to expose her neck. Taylor's eyes were half-lidded slits, her cheeks pink with color. Her mouth was parted, short breaths coming from her every time I filled her up.

"Let's show Hailee just how easily you come for me," I murmured. "Let's show her how much of a good girl you are."

With my honeyed words, Taylor shuddered, and at the same time, her core tightened around my cock.

Taylor couldn't speak. All she could do was pant while I fucked her, but I knew she was listening; I knew she'd be a good girl for me, like she always was.

I began to up my pace, rocking my hips quicker and pushing my cock into that sweet cunt harder. From a one to a four. We still had a ways to go until we reached a ten, but we'd get there. We'd get there in due time. Right now, I wanted to make her come for me again.

“Come for me, Taylor,” I purred out her name with approval, my grip on her sides a little harder. I pushed my cock into her pussy again, whispering, “Come on my cock like you always do. Let me feel you lose it.” My words came out in a low, rough growl, and she responded by moaning.

Oh, I had her. I knew I had her.

I picked up my pace a little more, probably at a six, I'd say, whereas a ten would be a bed-rocking, frame-breaking fuck that ended with a mangled cry from both our lips as we came. I pumped in and out of her pussy, hitting the spot inside of her that made her writhe. Taylor shivered, another moan escaping her lips, and I kept up the pace for as long as it took.

Hint: it didn't take long. She was probably still delirious from her first two orgasms, so it didn't take long at all for her to reach her apex a third time. And this time, when she came, she came around my cock, the pleasure surging through her so hard she had to cry out my name. Her inner walls clamped down, inching me toward my own precipice, but I managed to stave off the feeling—just barely.

“Good girl,” I breathed out, the words rough.

As the orgasm faded, her arms gave out. Taylor was on the bed, ass in the air, breathing quite hard while trying to gather herself. I pulled out of her pussy, my cock glistening with her arousal, her natural juices, and I helped her off the bed, lowering her to her knees. The first time I came tonight, I wanted her to swallow up every bit of cum I gave her.



Taylor didn't fight me; she knew what I wanted, and though she was still quite out of breath, she didn't argue with me. I took a hand to her head, forcing her mouth to the top of my cock, and her lips parted. She took me in, tasting herself on my length.

My head fell back, and I let out a short groan when she started to suck. Oh, fuck. With every suck, every movement of that tongue on the underside of my length, I could feel my restraint waning. The resistance to coming grew smaller and smaller until it became an urge I could deny no more.

I came with a vengeance, and my hips moved on their own, pushing my cock deeper into that sweet mouth as the orgasm took over. Hot, searing pleasure raced through my veins, my balls tightening, my cock letting loose a stream of cum straight into her throat.

Taylor swallowed me up like a good girl, taking every squirt I gave her, and when I pulled out of her mouth, she licked her lips, eyes opening and staring up at me, as if she could go for more.

I helped her up, back on the bed, and this time I crawled up with her. I spun our position so that we faced Hailee on the chair, and I had Taylor on her hands and knees again; true doggie style. I didn't wait or play around—I pushed into her pussy again, filling her up in one thrust. Her body took me in, slick and wet and ready for me.

On her hands and knees before me, Taylor's body swayed with every thrust of mine. Each time I pushed deep into her, she moved with me. She breathed hard and loud, a signal of what she felt, of the feelings I gave her.

I didn't pay a glance at Hailee; I knew she watched. I knew she watched us with a frown on her face and both hatred and annoyance in her heart. Already, I'd fucked Taylor like I'd never fucked her before. You could not compare a business arrangement to something of the heart, of the soul. With her, there'd never been more than a simple bodily need... but with Taylor, there was everything.

I fucked Taylor harder now, with quick, rough thrusts. My cock pumped in and out of her pussy with wild abandon, and I chased after another orgasm. By the time I was done, I'd have filled Taylor's pussy with cum many times over and marked up her body with even more. I meant it when I said I wouldn't stop until the well was dry.

And, hell, even then, all it would take was a little break before we could go at it again. Of course, come eight tonight, we'd have to break so she could take her pill, anyways, so maybe that could be our scheduled intermission.

Time ceased to matter to me or to Taylor. We were slaves to the instincts deep inside our souls, to the desperate need we had to have our fill of the other. We became animals chasing a high, cum and orgasms aplenty, the bed our natural state. I showered every inch of her body with my mouth and my cock; I lost track of how many times she came for me and how many times I came in return. The minutes turned into hours, and it was a sight to behold, a marathon of sweat and sex.

Hailee stopped trying to entice us to release her early. She resigned herself to watch whatever show we gave her, trying to act emotionless, but failing each and every time. Just a quick glance in her direction and anyone would know her sheer irritation, how wounded her pride was. If I wasn't so lost in Taylor and her body, I might've laughed at her.

We took a break at our scheduled time, and Taylor and I left the room to eat a little something and drink some water to refuel. Taylor also took her pill. Soon enough, we were raring to go for round two.

Back in the bedroom, Hailee hadn't moved an inch, for obvious reasons. She shot a glare in our direction as we strolled back in, and she hissed out the words, "I get it, okay? Goddamn it, I get it. Just let me go." She struggled against the restraints, but they didn't give—and neither did I.

Within another moment, Taylor and I were back on the bed, my cock out and hardening up as Taylor played with it. I still kept all of my clothes on, but I had let Taylor unbutton my

shirt a few times near the clavicle... mostly so she could kiss me there.

I lay down on my back, heaving Taylor on top of me. She looked unsure; she'd never been on top before. I was the kind of man who liked being in charge, but seeing how long we were going at it, perhaps now was the time to try it out. I set my hands on her thighs. Taylor straddled me, her pussy lips near my cock.

“Just take me in and move your hips,” I told her, locking eyes with her. “Set the pace however you want it—fast, slow, somewhere in between. If you're on top, you make the rules.” One reason why I liked being on top; letting someone else have control of me didn't sit right with me, but if it was Taylor... let's just say she was the one person on this entire planet I'd be okay with ordering me around.

Taylor's green gaze held reservations, and she puckered her lips in uncertainty. She didn't argue with me, though; she simply took hold of my cock and positioned herself above it. She said not a word as she sunk down onto it, taking me in slowly. A trembling breath left her, and without another word, she set the pace.

Her hips rocked slowly at first, I assumed so she could get used to being on top, but then she picked it up, moving her hips faster along me. I held onto her thighs, and now that I was no longer on top, I could take a moment to let my eyes fall to her naked body.

Fuck. She was gorgeous. Her tits heaving, her nipples hard and pointed, her body curved above mine as she rocked those hips and dragged my cock in and out of her; she was the sexiest girl I'd ever seen. She had me heart, body, and soul.

I fucking loved her. I loved her so much. If anyone ever tried to take her from me, I'd kill them. I'd make their end so painful and bloody they'd wish they'd never tried to. Nothing and no one could keep her from me. Taylor was mine in every sense of the word.

I watched her rock along me for a while, memorizing each and every detail on her naked body, plucking the sounds she

made from the air and tucking them away for later in my head. Taylor was beauty incarnate, everything I wanted, pure and innocent, yet wild and a vixen, when pushed to the limit.

“Turn around,” I spoke, my voice husky as I commanded her. Even when on the bottom, I couldn’t help but give orders. Taylor started to get up off my cock, her hips pausing in their rocking, but I stopped her. “No. Don’t get off me. Just spin.”

“I...” She trailed off, finally realizing what I meant.

I helped her spin around on my cock, so that she now faced Hailee and I had a nice view of her round, supple ass. I squeezed those cheeks as I whispered, “Continue.”

Taylor’s hips resumed the pace they’d had earlier, and she bounced along my cock like milking me was her job. I had no idea if her eyes were open or closed, if she paid any attention to Hailee or not, but it didn’t matter. She was zeroed in on me and my cock.

Her pace picked up once again, her body rocking along my cock, hard and fast movements. She drew a moan from me, and my fingers squeezed her hips, my eyes closing against my will. If I had my way, I’d never take my eyes off her, but your body did whatever the hell it wanted when it came.

And, God, did I come. My abdomen tensed up, the pleasure building within my balls and the base of my cock. The orgasm hit me like a brick wall, flung at me from a high speed. It exploded within me, much like how I then exploded within Taylor’s pussy, squirts of cum hitting her core over and over, once more coating her inner walls and marking her as mine.

I sat up, wrapping an arm around her front. I turned her around so that she faced me once more, and then I spun us so that I was once again on top. Couldn’t keep going like that, no fucking way. As hot as Taylor was on top, her riding me would be an infrequent occurrence.

As I took the lead, starting to fuck her myself once more, I didn’t think I’d ever felt such a wet pussy before. Loaded up with my cum, she was dripping for me. Taylor squirmed under

me, her hands finding my sides under the shirt, her nails digging into my flesh as she wordlessly asked for more.

So, I gave her more. I gave her all her body could handle, and then some. I pushed her to the brink, pushed us both to the brink, and then I brought us back around again. Her pussy was getting a good workout tonight. Same with my cock.

I didn't know how many times I came, nor did I know much time passed, but it had to be a while. I gave a new meaning to the word *stamina*. They'd have to update all of the definitions for the word online and in any printed dictionary.

In addition to that, I was almost sure that Taylor would be sore between the legs in the morning. She might have some trouble walking, her legs being so spread wide for me, her cunt aching from me pounding away at it. If she had to stay home from her classes, I wouldn't shed any tears.

One look at Hailee, and I could tell she'd given up. All of her fight, all of her attitude; it had drained away these last few hours, watching us together, just as I thought it would. But we weren't quite finished yet.

Taylor was on her back under me, her brown hair splayed in a wild, unkempt halo around her head. I'd flipped her so that her head now rested on my pillow; Hailee couldn't see much from where she was at, but she'd seen enough.

Trembling, uneven breaths left Taylor every few seconds, her gasping for air in tune with the rough thrusts from my hips and the pumping of my cock. Her skin was on fire, sweat lining her body, and still she was beautiful. Surely more beautiful than anything else, than anyone else I'd ever seen.

And the sounds that came from her in between her breathing... God, I wished I could bottle them up and save them for later. Memorizing the sounds wasn't enough. Still, if I had my way, a night wouldn't pass that I didn't hear Taylor's sounds firsthand—unless I was out on a job, in which case nothing could be done. But I didn't want to think about that right now.

I fucked Taylor, chasing one last orgasm. One final hurrah, so to speak. I kept in tune with my body, so I'd know when it was building, so I'd feel it when the cum threatened to spill out of me. When it happened, there was something else I had planned.

I stared at Taylor beneath me, and the sight of her body swaying along with me helped further me along. Never had there been a more erotic sight. With her full lips parted, her tits heaving from the force of my cock, she was the kind of girl wars had been started over in the past. I'd gladly go to war for her.

I'd kill for her. I'd kill to keep her safe. I'd kill the whole fucking world.

"Creed." My name left her lips in a hushed whisper, in between thrusts from me. Her eyelids fluttered shut, and her hands held onto the sides of my abdomen tighter, fingernails digging in. Her back arched, a desperate, needy movement that called out to the animal inside me, and that animal met and heeded its call.

A low pressure blossomed in my lower half, my balls aching once more with a need to release. I took hold of the feeling, let it guide me in how I fucked her, chasing the high that came afterward.

The orgasm hit me full-force, knocking all the wind from my lungs as it drew out a sound that was more a growl than anything else. Quick, hard jerks of my cock—but all that came inside her cunt was one squirt of cum.

I moved my hips back as I fought against the orgasm, taking a hand to my wet cock and pumping along its length, guiding where it sprayed the rest of the final load.

On her pussy lips. On her clit. On her inner thighs. I marked Taylor with my cum, the sticky stuff slowly oozing down along her body, wherever it landed.

Though I wanted nothing more than to lose myself to the orgasm, relax and let its high travel through me, I managed to pull myself away from Taylor, getting to my feet beside the

bed. I kept my back to Hailee as I stuffed my cock away, zipping up my pants and buttoning them. I turned to look at Taylor.

My girl hadn't moved a muscle, too worn out, too out of breath to get up. Her eyes were still closed, and she still breathed hard.

I slowly turned my head toward Hailee, whose eyes shifted between me and Taylor. I knew she hoped I'd let her go, now that we were finally done with her lesson. I also didn't doubt she hated me after this—but that was good. If she hated me, she wouldn't try to insert herself back into my life.

Hell, even now, I didn't know what had come over her, why she'd thought it was a good idea to bug me so much, to come at Taylor on the street. She'd never been my girlfriend. Unless, somewhere along the way, she'd started to develop something for me, and the payment afterward was a bonus.

That wasn't how relationships worked. I'd spend all of my money on Taylor, but I'd never pay Taylor for sex.

I strolled over to the chair, to Hailee, and I took her chin between my fingers, forcing her head back, angling it up so she stared at me. "We're almost done," I told her, narrowing my eyes at her. "There is one last thing I need from you before I let you go—one last thing Taylor needs, I should say."

Hailee's brow furrowed, and her lips turned down in a frown. "What?" The word was spoken so softly, I almost didn't hear it, and I stood directly beside her. It was almost like she was hesitant, something which she never, ever was, and that made me smirk.

I released her chin, sinking to my knees to undo the straps holding her ankles to the chair. "You will go to the bed, and you will clean Taylor up." When I heard her suck in a breath, a bit of feistiness returning to her, I added in a low, deadly growl, "I will not let you leave this room until it's done. Do you think you're faster than me? Do you think you're stronger than me? You're not, but if you want to test me... go ahead."

I think we both knew what would happen if she tested me.

She'd wind up back in the chair. Maybe I'd make her sit there for another day. Maybe I'd starve her. I supposed some might consider this vindictive, but I didn't give a shit. She'd spoken down to Taylor, made Taylor feel uncomfortable, and that was a sin I simply could not forgive.

All fight vanished from her, and Hailee's lips curled into an outright pout. She didn't say a word to me, not even as I worked on undoing the straps around her wrists. Once she was free, I stepped aside.

Hailee wanted to kill me. Of course, when someone like her wanted to kill someone else, the logistics of the violence were never really figured out; everyone wanted to kill someone at one point or another. It was an emotion that was human. What separated me and the others in the Guild was the fact that we were strong enough, cold enough, to go through with it. We could turn our emotions off if we had to, in order to get the job done. Not everyone could do something like that.

She didn't try to run, nor did she say a single word as she shuffled over to the bed. Taylor had opened her eyes, propped herself up somewhat, staring at me with a questioning look. As Hailee crawled onto the bed and situated herself between Taylor's spread legs, I sat on the bed near Taylor's head, reaching a hand toward her face and smoothing down her hair.

I could read Taylor like a book. She wasn't expecting this, and she didn't quite know why I was doing it, why I was making Hailee clean her up.

Part of the lesson. Had to make sure it was a lesson Hailee never forgot, and cleaning up the girl she evidently looked down on, cleaning the girl who she thought she was better than, was definitely something that would stick.

I didn't get up. I stayed beside Taylor, a hand on her hair, as Hailee began her work. My eyes raked along Taylor's body, taking it in, all of its naked, sweaty glory before falling to Hailee between her thighs.

Hailee wasn't stupid, even if she acted like it sometimes. She knew I didn't mean for her to clean Taylor up with her



hands. No, there was only one way to clean her up, and that was with her tongue. She'd lick my cum off Taylor's thighs, off her clit, and out of her pussy. It'd be the last time she ever tasted my cum on that tongue, and it'd come with the added taste of Taylor's sweat and her slick arousal.

I saw that tongue of hers slip out from between her lips, and I knew the exact moment she touched Taylor's thigh with it, because Taylor shivered. Her entire body trembled a bit, and I told her, "Just close your eyes." That might make it easier for her. Maybe Taylor feared Hailee would try to do something down there, but she wouldn't; not while I was here, overseeing.

Hailee licked up the cum on Taylor's thighs, and she shot a glare my way before moving her face in front of Taylor's clit. If looks could kill... but they could not, so she got back to work. She lowered her mouth to her clit, and Taylor let out a breathy sigh.

Taylor's head rolled toward me, her eyes opened in slits. Her breathing hitched, and I could tell she was fighting it. She was so turned on, so aroused by our previous fucking, I really couldn't blame her for it.

I'd never let any man get between those legs, but this was different. This was a lesson for Hailee—and it just so happened that Hailee was a woman. A woman who was very good with her tongue.

So, as I gazed down at Taylor, as Hailee continued to clean her up, I gave her a tiny nod. I didn't have to say a word. Through her sex-filled haze, Taylor knew precisely what I meant by it.

Taylor's eyes closed once more, and her hips began to rock against Hailee's face. I could only imagine what she was doing down there with her tongue, but with Taylor's thighs tighter around her head, there was no pulling back right now.

Hailee's mouth must've dipped lower, licking along her slick folds and landing at her pussy, because Taylor let out a muffled cry, a telltale sound if I ever heard one. I'd say my girl was close to orgasming again.

I had to fight with myself once I realized it. The jealous part of me wanted all of her orgasms to myself, but I supposed, just this once, I could sit back and let her have one with someone else. That someone was only between her legs because of me, let's not forget.

One. Just one, while Hailee cleaned her up good for me, and then I'd drag Hailee out of the room, down the hall, and throw her out of our lives forever.

Another sound came from Taylor's throat, a sharp inhalation of air. With one hand on the top of her head, I moved my other to her left tit, pinching the nipple and drawing out another moan from her. She still ground on Hailee's face, only with more gusto now, like she was less afraid of chasing her own pleasure while I used her to make a point. I could tell she was close, the movements of her hips jerky and uneven.

Hailee tried to withdraw her face from Taylor right then, as if she was finished cleaning her up—and maybe was, but with how close Taylor was to coming, and the fact that pulling away from her was Hailee trying to regain control of the situation, I wouldn't let it slide. I let go of Taylor's nipple, moving to grip the back of Hailee's head, my fingers curling through her hair in a grip that must've been uncomfortable.

"No," I whispered. "You'll stay there until Taylor's done."

With my hand on the back of Hailee's head, she had nowhere to go. Maybe she figured she'd get out of here faster if Taylor came quicker, but she stopped trying to pull away, and I'd bet anything she resumed using her tongue—mostly because Taylor gasped and moaned again.

My eyes were on Taylor, on the way her tits rose and fell, on the way her hips ground on Hailee's face. My ears heard nothing but the sound of carnal pleasure slipping past Taylor's lips. My cock, even with the workout it had gotten already, twitched in my pants at the sight of her about to come again.

I supposed, the warring jealousy inside aside, it was kind of sexy to watch Taylor use another woman like this. I'd probably get more into it if it wasn't Hailee between her legs.

“Oh, fuck.” The words left Taylor in a rush, her expression twisting into one she wore when she came. Her body spasmed as the orgasm hit her, a strangled cry of pleasure coming from her throat. The grinding of her hips on Hailee’s face slowed to a halt, and her thighs loosened around her blond head. She relaxed, appearing so suddenly tired, she could sleep right there.

Hmm. I think, after I kicked Hailee out, we might have to fuck one more time. The cock in my pants just didn’t know when to quit, and it refused to quit after watching that.

I let go of Hailee’s head, getting to my feet beside the bed as Hailee did the same. I didn’t let her say a word; I took her by the arm and pulled her along. Out of the bedroom, away from Taylor, through the hall. She didn’t resist, didn’t fight me, nor did she ask to use my bathroom—her chin was a little wet after going down on Taylor.

It was when we stood before the door that I spoke, my voice as deadly as it had ever been, “If I see you here again, if I hear that you’re bothering Taylor or even the fucking guards... I won’t give you the chance to bother us again.” I opened the door and pushed her out. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Hailee?”

She straightened herself out, her jaw grinding as she spun to glare at me. Still, glare as she might, it had a lot less gusto behind it. I wouldn’t say I broke her, but she definitely got the point. “Yeah, I get it,” she muttered, unhappy, and then she walked away.

And as she walked away, she licked her middle finger and held it up for me, flicking me off as she went.

I didn’t linger on it; I didn’t give a shit if she flicked me off. I shut the door, locked it back up, and returned to my room, where Taylor waited for me, where I was ready to go for another round. I could not tear off my clothes quickly enough, and when I lunged onto the bed, pinning Taylor down once again, I knew this was it.

This was my forever. Taylor’s arms were always where I wanted to be, and between those thighs was always where my

cock wished to be.

“Do you think she’ll leave us alone?” Taylor asked, her voice husky and coarse from the sex we’d had. She gazed up at me with such an expectant look, her pupils dilated from desire. I’d say she was still pretty high from her orgasms.

I gave her a single nod, one of my hands roaming down her body, between her tits, stopping when my fingers curved along her apex, pinching that swollen nub of flesh. “I know she will,” I whispered, my mouth lowering to hers as I kissed whatever else she was about to say away.

Now wasn’t the time to talk about Hailee. Now was the time to enjoy each other with no audience.

## Chapter Nineteen – Taylor

Let's just say, come morning, I was one sore girl. Like, I never knew certain parts of me could be sore, but the mere thought of sticking something up my vagina made me squeeze my thighs together in defense.

I mean, I loved Creed, I did. I loved being with him. Of course, I loved having sex with him. Last night had just been, uh... a little too much for the lady downstairs.

A lot of sex. A lot of cum. A lot of orgasms—and one particular orgasm that had been aided by none other than Hailee.

Yeah. Oops.

Honestly, I didn't know what had come over me then. Maybe it was just because I had addled sex brain or something. Maybe I should've put up a bigger fight and told Creed I thought it was unnecessary for Hailee to, to use his words, *clean me up*. I hadn't, though.

And then, after he'd escorted her out, he'd come back to me and wanted another go. Who was I to say no, especially when I wanted the same? Yeah, the next morning was when it really hit me, my body asking me what the hell I'd done.

I didn't want to skip my classes though, so I still managed to get up, shower, and go. Since I had taken out loans for college, I really tried not to miss more classes than I had to, and missing them because of the previous day's sex capades didn't seem like a good enough reason.

Besides, I think being out of the apartment and away from Creed might be good for me. My body. You know, put the brakes on more sex, at least for now. Give me some time to recuperate before going at it like animals again.

It was... it was amazing. Really. Even with an audience of one, Creed had been everything I knew him to be and more.

All I saw in that room was him. I never, ever thought I'd be fucked like that—and it was *fucking*. Not making love, not just sex. It was wild fucking. Hence why I was sore.

But, I really shouldn't be thinking of any of that right now. I needed to focus on current reality, which was me sitting in a huge lecture hall, trying to pay attention to whatever it was my professor was lecturing about.

I sat near the front row, so I was sure it was painfully obvious to the professor when I wasn't paying attention. My only saving grace were the rows and rows of chairs behind me, full of students who also probably weren't paying their full attention to this lecture.

Big lecture halls like this, the classes were usually tame. Pretty easy. Their tests were always multiple choice since there were so many to grade, and the professors pretty much stuck close to the textbook.

I did my best, which wasn't much today, but that would be my secret.

When class let out, I got a text from Beth. She wanted to meet for lunch, said she'd buy a pizza and meet me at our bench. I was always down for pizza; what full-blooded American wasn't? So, I texted her back that was fine, and I headed out of the building, toward the courtyard and the lone green area of campus.

The weather was pretty decent today, although it was a little chillier than usual. I'd worn a baggy sweater top and yoga pants. Anything tight down there was a no-go for a while, until my you-know-what wasn't sore.

I made it to our table and set my bag down beside me. Creed had texted me, asking me how I was feeling, and I was busy texting him back and forth when Beth showed, pizza box in her hands. I set my phone down, looking up at her. Her black hair was tied up in a bun, no makeup on her face today.

“God, I'm tired,” she whined as she sat down. She pulled out two water bottles from her bag, rolling one over to me. She took off the lid and drank a sip.

“Me, too,” I huffed in agreement.

“I stayed up late binge-watching *Shadow and Bone*.”

I chuckled. “Haven’t you seen that like a thousand times already?” No way in hell would I tell her why I was tired. That truth would stick with me, and the only other person who knew would be Creed. It’d stay that way.

“Yeah, but Ben Barnes.”

“Ben Barnes what?”

Beth blinked, as if it should’ve been obvious. “Ben Barnes is fine as hell.”

“Isn’t he, like, forty years old?” I lifted the pizza box and grabbed myself a slice, biting into its warm deliciousness. Considering I didn’t eat much this morning or last night, it was heaven in my mouth.

“Yeah, but the dude is ageless. So yummy.” Beth picked up a slice. “Especially when he plays the bad guy.”

I watched the show she was talking about once, back when it first came out. Ben Barnes was a good-looking guy, no lie, but now, the only good-looking guy for me was Creed. They were quite similar in appearance, I realized. Having Ben Barnes play Creed in a documentary about our lives wouldn’t be so awful.

“Why are you so tired? Stay up all night doing homework like you always do?” Beth asked, her mouth full.

“What?” I must’ve been too busy thinking about Creed being played by Ben Barnes that I didn’t hear her, at first. After Beth repeated what she’d said, I answered her, “Oh, it’s a long story. Not homework this time.”

The way Beth stared at me, I could tell she was expecting more. More from me, more out of the story... just more in general. So, I went on, “Family drama. It’s all good now, but I definitely could use a weekend.”

“Sorry, girl, we still have a few days until then.”

That was very sad, but also very true.

“What about your mystery guy? Have you still been talking to him? You’ve been quiet on that front lately, it’s suspicious.” Beth squinted at me, acting overly dramatic about it all as she took another large bite from her slice.

And here I’d thought she’d forgotten. I should’ve known Beth would never forget something like that. My boy-crazy friend to the not-so-needed rescue.

“Yes, I’m still talking to him,” I admitted.

“You know, sooner or later you’re going to have to tell me who he is. I need to do research on him to make sure he’s not a serial killer.” Beth licked her lips after finishing the crust on her piece. “I’m just saying, someone who doesn’t have any social media these days is either hiding the fact that he’s in a relationship and lying to you about it or a serial killer.”

I chuckled. “Those are the only two reasons, huh?”

“Uh, yeah!”

“So, you don’t think serial killers are on social media?”

“No, of course there are some, but I’m betting there are more out there who aren’t.”

I didn’t eat the crust off my piece, and I slipped it back into the box before picking up a second piece. “Uh-huh. And how many Netflix documentaries did you watch to become an expert on the subject?”

“I’ve lost count,” she deadpanned, and we both laughed at that. “Seriously, though, when are you going to tell me who he is? I’m dying over here, Taylor! Dying!”

“I don’t think you’re dying.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, when I fall over, randomly dead, just know it’s because of you and your secret boyfriend.” Beth shook her head once. “I still can’t believe you won’t tell me. It’s not like I’ll try to slide into his DMs or anything—”

“I know you wouldn’t, but he’s not on anything. He can’t be, because of work.”



Beth wouldn't let it go. It's all she could talk about during lunch, but I did my best to fend her off, so to speak. I wasn't going to tell her about Creed, not now. Maybe in the future, once I had a more concrete story to tell her. I just... I didn't want her to know that my dad was abusive and I'd run to my stepbrother because he was the only person I could think of.

She'd only ask me why I hadn't come to her instead, and what could I say to that? That I'd been ashamed? That I didn't want my single friend, the only one I'd ever really had, to know that I was so weak I'd been turning my cheek to everything my dad had done for years? No, I didn't want to tell her any of *that*.

In all honesty, she'd probably not blink an eye at the whole stepbrother thing. I might've grown up idolizing Creed as a brother, but he wasn't actually my brother, and we'd spent the last ten years apart. Those ten years were enough to wipe away whatever we might've had.

I liked Beth, I did, and I enjoyed eating lunch together, but today, I was also grateful when our time together ended, mostly because I couldn't take any more questions. We went our separate ways, both of us heading to our afternoon classes.

Late afternoon came soon enough, and I walked home.

As I walked, a strange feeling came over me, something I couldn't describe. You know the saying that your nose itched when someone else was talking or thinking about you? It was kind of like that, except it was more of a whole-body experience than just my nose.

I threw a glance over my shoulder a few times as I walked, but I didn't see anything. Nothing out of the ordinary. I assumed I was just a little paranoid after everything with Hailee and my dad, so I carried on.

I wouldn't say it felt like I was being followed, but... well, it felt like I was being followed.

When I made it inside Creed's place, I found Creed sitting near the island, reading something on a tablet. When I walked

in, he set the tablet down, his dark features twisting in concern as he noted the look on my face. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. I just...” I trailed off. I didn’t know how to say it without sounding like I was losing my mind. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” I gave Creed a smile, walked over to him and kissed his cheek. “I’m just going insane.” I tried walking away—I did have some homework to do, since yesterday had been full of fucking—but Creed’s arm shot out, his hand wrapping around my wrist and stopping me cold.

“What is it?” I didn’t respond to him right away, and he yanked me back to him. “I’m not going to let you go until you tell me.”

“It’s nothing, really. It’s just... I got a weird feeling when I was walking home, like, I don’t know, someone was following me.” Even when I said it, I cringed at my own paranoia. “I looked, multiple times, and I didn’t see anyone.”

Creed’s grip on my wrist loosened, but he didn’t let me go. “Sometimes, when we get that feeling, it’s our gut telling us something is off. Sometimes our gut is wrong, but sometimes it’s right.”

I met his dark, almost pupil-less stare. “You don’t think Hailee would—”

“No,” he cut in. “I don’t think she’d try anything.” His thumb rubbed the back of my hand when his hand fell to hold mine. “Still, if you felt something was off, perhaps you should not walk to and from campus. I’ll drive you from now on. I should’ve this whole time.”

It was my turn to say, “No. I don’t mind walking. I like it. It lets me clear my head.” And, let’s be real, walking was about the only exercise I got lately, other than sex with Creed—and I definitely considered sex with Creed a sport.

Creed sighed, releasing my hand only so he could touch my face, gently cupping my cheek with his strong, firm hand. “I would never forgive myself if something happened to you. You know that, right? Let me drive you.”

I didn't want to bother him. I didn't want to force him to go out of his way just to drive me to campus and pick me up every single day. What if I started to rely on that and he had to go away for a week or two for another job? He'd told me his work was random, so it wasn't something I could prepare for.

"It's fine," I told him. "I'm fine. It was all in my head."

"We should get you a car," he said. "Then you can drive yourself. It'll make me feel better."

My mouth fell open at that. A car? He wanted to go out and buy me a freaking *car*? I mean, I knew he'd spent a lot of money on me when I'd first asked him for help, but buying me clothes and a laptop was way different than buying me a car.

When I didn't say anything more, Creed said, "It's settled. We're getting you a vehicle."

"Creed—"

"No, it's happening, whether you want it to or not. It's something I should've looked into before, but..." It was his turn to pause and mull over his thoughts. "When you first called me, when you asked me for help, I... I was worried you'd change your mind and want to leave, especially after some of the things I did. Not getting you a car was my way of trying to keep you here—"

I wasn't used to this darkly vulnerable side of Creed, and I leaned into his face, giving him a soft kiss on the lips. With him sitting, it was a lot easier to do than when he was standing. "I'm not going to leave, but I also don't want you to buy me a car. Let me walk."

His chest rumbled. "Fine, you can walk for now, but I'm going to start looking for a car."

That was as good as I'd get with Creed, so I didn't argue.

Creed released me, and it was as I turned around and started to walk away, my intent to go to my room and work on some homework, that he called out, "But if you feel the same thing again, you call me immediately. I'll come pick you up, wherever you are."

I relented, “Okay,” mostly because there was no arguing with him about this. I resumed my walk to my bedroom, pondering it all the while. I didn’t know if I believed the school of thought that said your intuition was always right, but Creed certainly believed it.

Hmm. I didn’t know. Maybe it was just my imagination, playing games with me. Maybe nothing had been wrong at all, and I’d unconsciously made it up.

But, if someone really was following me, who was it and why?

Two options came to mind: Hailee and my dad. My dad for obvious reasons, and Hailee for different but still obvious reasons. I imagined both wanted to get back at me for the things I’d done—for leaving him and refusing to go home with him, and for simply existing and being with Creed.

That said, would either one of them really follow me? Would they have the guts? I didn’t know. Hailee seemed like a more in-your-face kind of woman, someone who didn’t take any shit and was quite loud about it, while my dad... well, he wasn’t someone who stalked in the shadows, either. He was blunt to the extreme, wholly unable to be quiet and wait for the right time to strike.

At least, I thought those things were true. It wasn’t like I was in either of their heads, so I couldn’t say for sure if what I’d thought about them was totally true.

There was nothing to be done about it right now. All I could do was some homework and hope that it was just a one-off, that I wouldn’t feel that same spidey sense tomorrow or any day in the future.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t so lucky.

The next day I felt the exact same thing, only this time, I felt it walking *to* campus instead of from it. I didn’t tell Creed, mostly because I didn’t want him to freak out. It was an uncanny feeling, that was for sure, one I couldn’t say I’d ever

felt before in my life, but the last thing I wanted was to make a big deal about it.

For one thing, I didn't want to seem paranoid. I didn't want Creed to think I was some scared little girl who couldn't handle herself. I'd already been forced to come to him at my hour of need, and I wanted to prove that I could take care of myself... and that included walking to and from campus by myself.

Downtown wasn't the safest place, it was true, but if you walked along the sidewalks, avoided the alleyways, and only did so during the day, you were fine.

Secondly, I really didn't want Creed to buy me a car. It felt... weird, almost, to accept such a huge gift. And it would be a gift—there was no possible way I'd be able to pay him back for the clothes and laptop, let alone a freaking car. That wasn't to say I was prideful, but it was hard to explain.

I didn't know what was going on, because when I felt it walking to campus, I stopped walking and looked all around. No one on the sidewalks was paying attention to me, and there was no car on the four-lane street holding up traffic by going slow and following me. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

When I saw Beth later that day, I mentioned to her that I felt like I was being followed earlier, and she asked why I couldn't ride the bus. She also said to be careful, because in this world, you never knew what kind of psychopath could be waiting for you just around the corner.

All that was true. I wasn't saying it was false, but come on. Who the hell would want to come after me? *Me?* I was no one. Again, only my dad and Hailee popped up in my head, and I doubted either of those two would actually go through with it. Plus, my dad worked during the day. Unless he took off to stalk me, there was no way it could be him.

I had foolish hope that I wouldn't feel that same invisible, nagging, eerie feeling when I walked home... but I did. I did, and this time, I found out why.

I walked with a fast pace, quicker than I normally did, and right when Creed's high rise came into view, a car suddenly pulled off the street, its right side coming up onto the sidewalk right in front of me, maybe five feet away.

My feet skidded to a halt, a sinking feeling in my gut—because I recognized that car. It was old, a little rusted, beat up in its age, but that's just what happened to old cars.

Something in me jumped to the surface: that scared little girl I used to be. She made me motionless as I watched my dad get out of the car, walk around the vehicle and onto the sidewalk, heading straight for me. I didn't move, didn't say a thing, not even as he took me by the arm and dragged me to the car, yanking open the passenger door and slamming it shut after pushing me inside.

It was almost like I wasn't there, not really, like I was on the sidelines, watching it happen in horror without the strength or the ability to step in and stop it. Like I was watching a movie, albeit a shitty movie that I never wanted to see in the first place.

Maybe I was so shocked at seeing my dad, at his sheer audacity to do what he did, that all logic evaporated within me. How else could I explain the fact that I didn't fight him, didn't try to break free from him or get out of the car after he pushed me in? How else could I explain away the reason that I merely stared off into the distance, unable to fully comprehend what was happening?

It all happened fast. Faster than the guard to Creed's building could react. He saw what happened, but by the time he ran over to us, my dad had pulled the car back onto the street, and we were off.

“So that's where he lives, huh?” my dad was busy saying as we drove off. “Fancy fucking place. Funny how he could abandon us to go live the high life when his mother died without looking back. We could've used the money—”

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. In fact, I could barely hear my dad mumbling that. I sat there, my hands on my lap,

practically mute. My schoolbag had fallen to the floor of the passenger seat, resting between my knees.

“And you,” my dad said, shooting a heated glare in my direction. “Don’t even get me started on you. Did you think I’d let you go whoring yourself out to your brother just so you could get away from me? You’re my daughter, Taylor, so what I say goes, and I say you ain’t living with Creed no more. You’re coming home with me, where you belong, and that’s that.”

The hatred in his voice was palpable, practically tangible, and still I said nothing. It was obvious he hated Creed, felt deprived that Creed had money and he didn’t. Maybe if he didn’t spend most of his checks on booze he would have more money to spare—but I’d learned my lesson a long time ago when it came to pointing that out; Dad didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t want to hear anything that refuted his views on any subject.

Dad fumed as he drove us home, out of downtown and toward the old neighborhood we lived in. Watching the scenery change from high rises and new buildings to old, dilapidated houses was a bit of a shock; I think I’d gotten used to living downtown, in a fancy apartment, with Creed. It wasn’t that far away, and yet it was like a whole different world.

And, honestly, Dad didn’t live in a terrible place. Our house was just the worst looking because he never kept up with it. Never did yardwork, never fixed any broken siding that windstorms had knocked off. Everything had always been up to me, and there were just some things I could never do, like climb onto a ten-foot tall ladder we didn’t have to fix the siding.

I’d paid the bills. I’d done the laundry. I’d cooked in addition to doing my homework and trying to live my own life, but as it turned out, being the parent when you were nothing but a child was hard, and doing it while your so-called dad took every opportunity to remind you how worthless you were was even harder.

And that said nothing about all those times when he'd been so drunk that he'd pushed me around. The feeling of his hands around my neck was something I didn't think I'd ever forget, something that would stick with me until the day I died.

If my dad had his way, I'd die the day he died, because after he was dead, I'd have no reason to keep living. I was his servant, his slave, not his child. I was someone whose responsibility it was to take care of him, not the other way around.

Dad pulled into the driveway of his house, pulling all the way back to the garage. He parked the car, turned her off, and got out in a huff. He said not a single word more as he walked around the car and pulled me out, his grip on my upper arm so tight it hurt. He dragged me into the house, and the moment we stepped inside, he took my bag off and dropped it onto the floor, near the area where we always put our shoes. I was so out of it I didn't even cringe when I heard the laptop hit the floor inside the bag.

"You're going to your room to think about what you put me through," my dad hissed out, a frown on his face. He took me to the stairs, lugging me up, not caring that he held onto my arm so awkwardly I tripped. He didn't stop; he kept going, and once we reached my room, he practically threw me inside.

I was able to catch myself from tripping that time, slow to turn around and face him. My mouth opened, but no words came from me. All I could do was stare at my dad in confusion, in horror, and wonder why this was happening.

My dad glared at me, and it hit me: he looked old.

Maybe he'd always looked so haggard and rough, but it never really occurred to me just how old he looked until right now. That's what drinking so much did to you; it aged you, made your insides turn on you quicker than they naturally would. He wasn't that old, in his mid-forties, but he appeared so much older than that today.

"I don't want to hear a single word from you until I get an apology," he whispered, his mouth curled into a frown. He



wore the unhappy expression everywhere on his face, in his eyes and on his forehead. He said nothing else, grabbing my doorknob and slamming my door shut. I heard his heavy footsteps as he walked down the hall.

I didn't know how long I stood there, staring at the door, how long it took for me to regain some sense of self. It might've been a minute, it might've been five. I didn't know. Time was acting weird today—then again, the whole freaking day was weird.

Was this really happening? Was this real? My thoughts began to race as reality finally set in. It felt like a dream, and yet a part of me told me it was all very real. This was the culmination of the fight I'd had with my dad all that time ago, the one where he'd gotten so pissed at me he'd choked me and nearly killed me.

And if he did it once, he'd do it again. What if the next time it happened, there was no dirty glass in the sink? What if it happened and there was nothing in reach I could use to defend myself?

*What if he killed me?*

I didn't want to die. I had so much more I wanted to do, so many things I wanted to see, so much more I wanted to experience with Creed. By God, for the first time in my life, I wanted to *live*.

Was that really so wrong? Was I in the wrong here? A part of me, that same part of me that had refused to defend myself against my dad for so long told me *I* was the one who was wrong, that my dad was right. After all, I wouldn't exist without him, didn't I owe him?

But another part of me, the part of me that had taken control the day he'd choked me, the part of me that Creed had helped flourish and nourish all this time, told me he was the one who was wrong, not me.

Him, not me. It had never been me. All my life, it'd always been him, and I'd just been unlucky to have him as a father.

Maybe he wouldn't have gotten so bad if my stepmom hadn't died. Maybe, if she had lived and Creed had stuck around, he wouldn't be so bad.

Those were what-ifs, though, and there was no point now in giving any energy to them.

I turned away from the door, moving to sit on my bed as I gazed around my room. It looked untouched, exactly the same as I'd left it, not a thing out of place. Small compared to the room I'd gotten used to at Creed's place, but it had served as my safe spot for so long. This room was where I'd come when I had nowhere else to go. It was here, in this room, that I let myself wonder what it'd be like to have a loving dad, a mom who was still alive, a normal family.

I used to want those things. I used to dream of them, used to look at my peers with jealousy in my heart because they had things I would never have. I used to think everyone else was normal but me—but that's the thing, isn't it? Everyone had their own trauma. Some hid it better than others. Some people had it worse.

But, when you got down to it, we were all people. We were all fucked up individuals, in one way or another. That was the curse of living. The only perfect people were dead, because when you died, people remembered you with rose-colored glasses.

My hands fiddled on my lap, and it was then I remembered something. *My phone*. My dad had taken my bag away, but my phone sat in my back pocket—and I could use that phone to contact Creed.

The old me, the me that had let my dad take me, stepped aside and let the new me take over. I pulled out my phone and saw numerous missed calls and texts, all from Creed. My guess was the doorman had contacted Creed after seeing my dad take me. If I had to bet, I'd say he was already on his way here.

And knowing that gave me strength.

It really did mean the world to have someone else in my corner, to know I wasn't alone in this world anymore. It gave me a strength I never thought I'd have.

I dialed Creed's number, and he answered immediately: "Taylor, I'm coming." Hearing that, relief flooded me, and I fought a smile—I fought it because now wasn't the time to smile.

"I'm at the house," I said. "I'm sorry, I—"

Creed's deep voice interrupted me, "Don't be sorry. You have nothing to apologize for, do you understand? Nothing. Are you hurt? Did he do anything to you?"

"I'm fine," I spoke, swallowing. "How long until you get here?"

"I'm five minutes away. Where are you?"

"In my old room."

"Wait there. Don't do anything until I get there." His tone was commanding, even through the phone. There would be no disobeying a voice like that.

"Okay."

"Stay on the phone with me. If you hear your dad coming back, put the phone down, but leave it on. I want to hear everything that asshole says to you." He gave instructions like he was used to giving them, and I supposed he was. Being in charge came naturally to him.

I nodded, but then I realized he couldn't see me nod, so I whispered, "Okay." It felt like the word *okay* was all I could say right now, still speechless at this whole turn of events. If you would've asked me if I thought my dad was capable of kidnapping me, I would've told you no, that he wouldn't go that far... but here I was.

I should've known he would try something after he showed up on campus. I still wasn't sure how he'd figured out my schedule, if he managed to smooth-talk someone in the scheduling office or what. It didn't matter much anymore.

Creed didn't say anything after that, and neither did I. We were both silent, save for our breathing, and frankly, the simple act of hearing his steady breathing on the other line calmed me. I knew he was probably struggling to remain calm—I knew how Creed could flip on someone—but hearing him be outwardly calm helped me to soothe my nerves.

Creed had told me not to move, to stay in my room, and I was going to—but a part of me wanted to confront my dad, to ask him if he really thought we could go back to the way things had been before. If he thought we could press rewind and return to the days when I was his meek daughter, accepting whatever harsh words he threw my way, accepting his abuse like it was nothing, he was an idiot.

Once a paper was torn, you couldn't put it back together. With tape, sure, but it'd never be the same again. The same could be said of me. I was the paper, and Creed had helped to tear me up, tearing me away from my dad in the process, and regardless of how hard my dad tried to tape me back together in the shape of the daughter he wanted, it would never happen.

I'd moved on, and he should, too.

Waiting for Creed, time moved even slower. The seconds felt like hours, and I swore, an entire lifetime passed. It must've been the anticipation; I could feel it building in my veins. I couldn't wait for Creed to get here, for him to come barging into this house.

I never considered myself a damsel in distress, but after everything I'd gone through, was it so awful to want someone to save me? Was it really so bad to want someone to protect me when, my whole life, the one person that should've protected me had done nothing of the sort?

Eventually, I heard my dad coming up the steps, and I lowered the phone down to the bed, setting it atop the sheets, keeping it beside my right thigh, where my dad wouldn't see it. He barged into my room, fuming.

“What the fuck, Taylor?” He practically spat at me, reaching for me and pulling me to my feet. “You brought him

here? He's got no right to be here anymore! He left us! Don't you remember? He left us and he never looked back!" His hands were on my shoulders, and he shook me with every sentence he spoke.

"He's here because you kidnapped me," I pointed out, unable to say much else in the face of my dad.

His face twisted into an ugly scowl. "I didn't *kidnap* you. I brought you home, where you belong—" His face got redder by the second, the anger flowing through his system apparent.

"This isn't my home anymore!" I found my voice, so I shouted it at him, wanting him to understand—and wanting him to let me go. "My home is with Creed now, not you!" I tried to pull myself away from him, but his grip on my shoulders was like steel. He wouldn't let me go.

Creed had to be outside, trying to get into the house. My dad probably locked the door and all the windows, but Creed wouldn't let that stop him. No, he wouldn't let anything stop him from reaching me.

My dad's frown deepened, and one of his hands left my shoulder. With a jerk of that same hand, he backhanded me on the cheek, hard. The only reason I didn't fall to the floor afterward was because his other hand still held onto me, therefore held me up. Pain blossomed on my cheek, a dull heat rising to the surface that told me it'd bruise.

"Shut your mouth," he hissed out. "If you don't—"

"If I don't, what?" I asked, feeling bold. A lot bolder than I had earlier, when I'd been a limp doll while he'd taken me. "What are you going to do? You might be my dad, but I'm done taking your shit."

That was apparently too mouthy for him, and my dad showed me exactly what he'd do. As it turned out, it was the same thing he'd done that day he'd come home, drunk, and I'd forgotten to have dinner ready.

He wrapped both hands around my neck and started to choke me.

## Chapter Twenty – Creed

I shouldn't have taken no for an answer. I should've driven Taylor to campus and picked her up after she'd told me that she'd felt something was off yesterday as she was walking home. I'd been in the business long enough to know that when your intuition tried to tell you something, it was usually because something was going on. A sixth sense.

So, when the guard had the front desk contact me and let me know that there'd been an 'altercation' twenty feet away from the front door, I knew. Even before I went down and saw the camera footage of what happened, I'd known.

Her dad had come for her again, and this time he'd refused to take no for an answer.

The mere fact that he thought he could come take her and have no repercussions pissed me the fuck off. He didn't know what I did for a living; he probably saw the fancy skyscraper and assumed I was some rich fuck who sat on his ass all day telling others how to do their jobs.

But that wasn't me. That would never be me. I was as take-charge as someone could be. I was more than willing to take matters into my own hands—and if my hands got bloody? Then so be it. Sometimes that was a part of life.

I went straight for my car to go after her, to go get her and bring her home. Her home was with me now, not that asshole, and I'd be damned if I wasted more time before giving chase. Every minute that passed was another minute she was with him, and I didn't need a great imagination to think of ways that would be bad for Taylor.

I was peeling out of the parking garage soon after. I didn't need to use my GPS; I remembered the way to the house. They'd never moved. My hands were so tight on the wheel my knuckles turned white.

I didn't know how many times I dialed Taylor's number, but she never answered. So I resorted to telling my car to text her. No response to my texts, either, as the minutes ticked by. I got stuck in some traffic downtown—driving was always a bitch when you had someplace to be and you had to be there now. It was like the world knew and threw everything it could at you, Murphy's fucking Law.

The tension in me could be cut with a knife, it was so thick. My chest felt tighter than usual. If that asshole hurt her, if he laid a hand on her again... I wouldn't look the other way. I couldn't. I'd let him be out of respect for Taylor up until now, but I wouldn't leave him alone this time. This time, the creed I followed would dictate his fate.

Cold, hard, swift justice. Retribution for everything he'd done to her, all the harmful words he'd ever thrown at her, all the times he'd laid his hands on her. When he hit her, pushed her around... when he choked her. I would make him regret all of it.

I was less than ten minutes away from the house when my phone rang, and I answered it without glancing at the screen, knowing in my heart who it was: Taylor.

"Taylor, I'm coming," I said, my voice firm.

She spoke, sounding utterly worried, "I'm at the house. I'm sorry, I—"

I hated that she felt the need to apologize for this—this, something that wasn't her fault, not by a longshot. "Don't be sorry. You have nothing to apologize for, do you understand? Nothing. Are you hurt? Did he do anything to you?" If he touched her... if he hurt her, I'd fucking lose it.

"I'm fine," she said, though she sounded unsure about it. "How long until you get here?"

"I'm five minutes away. Where are you?"

"In my old room."

My jaw ground, my fingers tightening around my phone as I made a sharp left turn. "Wait there. Don't do anything until I

get there.” Now was not the time to argue with me, and I was immediately grateful that she didn’t.

She simply said, “Okay.”

“Stay on the phone with me,” I instructed. “If you hear your dad coming back, put the phone down, but leave it on. I want to hear everything that asshole says to you.”

She whispered, “Okay.”

Taylor became quiet after that, and so did I. There was nothing more to say, not right now, not when all of my focus was put on driving there as fast as I could to get to her as quickly as possible. The line became silent, save for the sound of her breathing. Hearing her speak, knowing she was unharmed, gave me a semblance of relief. Not much, but a little.

Minutes passed, and I neared the house. I found it after a bit, and as I pulled up the driveway, I gazed at the outside of the house. Not a single thing had changed from what I recalled; even after all this time, I couldn’t believe my mother, the Black Wolf, had stooped to marry this fool. She’d always had money, but she’d never wanted a life with it. Marrying Tom Hill was supposed to have been her reset, giving her and me the family she so desperately wanted.

I got out of the car, strolling up to the front door, still holding the phone against my ear.

Whatever relief I’d had from hearing from her was short-lived, though, because soon enough I heard her dad’s furious voice: “What the fuck, Taylor?” It sounded as if she’d set the phone down; he didn’t sound close to the phone. “You brought him here? He’s got no right to be here anymore! He left us! Don’t you remember? He left us and he never looked back!”

The front door was locked, so I left the front of the house, moving to the back, where there’d be fewer eyes; fewer eyes from the street and fewer eyes from the neighbors. Less likely for someone to call the police.

“He’s here because you kidnapped me,” Taylor said. I could hear the urgency in her tone.



“I didn’t *kidnap* you. I brought you home, where you belong—”

“This isn’t my home anymore! My home is with Creed now, not you!”

I was proud of her for standing up for herself, but it sounded as if her dad was blinded by his rage; he wouldn’t take her words lying down. As I made it to one of the back windows, I heard a sound on the other side of the phone: the slapping of skin on skin, and if I had to guess, I’d say the fucker hit her.

“Shut your mouth,” Tom hissed out. “If you don’t—”

“If I don’t, what? What are you going to do? You might be my dad, but I’m done taking your shit.”

I tore off the outer screen of the window, practically ripping it off the frame. I let loose all of the anger inside of me, punching the glass and cracking it with one blow. With another punch, I broke straight through it, shattering the glass into many jagged pieces. No time to pick a lock right now.

After that, I was able to twist my arm upward and unlock it, allowing me to slide the broken window up and crawl in.

On the phone, I heard the sounds of a scuffle, and I broke out into a sprint, darting through the living room, heading to the stairwell. I took two steps at a time in my rush to get upstairs, moving to Taylor’s old bedroom as quickly as I could—and when I ran in, the sight I saw... the sight I saw enraged me to no end.

Her dad had his hands wrapped around Taylor’s neck. He’d brought her down to the ground, his body towering over hers as he choked the life out of her. Her face had turned red, and struggle as she might, she couldn’t get him off, no stray glass to save her this time.

But she didn’t need a glass. I was here.

Tom was so intent on choking out his daughter, choking out my girl, while mumbling things about how she was such a shitty daughter that he neglected to realize I’d come into the room—and the very second I saw their positions, the very

moment I noted his hands curled angrily around her neck, something in me snapped.

I rushed toward them, wrapping an arm around Tom's neck from behind and jerking him back. My arm was inescapable, my grip around his neck so strong I could snap it in seconds if I needed to.

And it was a move he wasn't expecting, mostly because he hadn't heard me come in, too lost to his rage. His hands released Taylor's neck, and as my girl gasped and coughed for breath, I pulled him off her, throwing him against the wall with a swift, strong spin of my body.

His back collided with the drywall, hard enough to leave a dent. Tom was spitting mad now, and as he glared at me, he muttered, "This ain't your business. Get the fuck out of my house before I call the police." A threat that might cause other people to back down, but I was not among their number.

I stood less than four feet away from him, my stance a deadly one—but he wouldn't know that, because this idiot didn't know that I killed worse than him numerous times before. "Go ahead," I growled out, cracking my neck in anticipation of what was to come. "When they get here, they'll find nothing but your body, still warm."

When you said something your enemy wasn't expecting, you could see it: the moment you caught them off-guard with your words. And while they tried to piece together what you'd said, you took advantage and acted.

Tom didn't see me coming, even though I was right in front of him. My right hand curled into a fist, and I landed a hard, swift punch right across his jaw. He tried to hit me back, but I'd already landed another on his nose, shattering the cartilage and causing a good, steady flow of blood to flow from his nostrils.

I took a step back, easily outmaneuvering him, even in this small space. I didn't take my eyes off him, not as he lumbered forward, away from the wall, trying to pay me back for those punches.

Meanwhile, Taylor had sat up and scooted herself to the opposite corner. She still breathed heavily, and I'd bet anything she sat there, watching us while rubbing her neck. She'd undoubtedly come out of this with another bruise.

"I should've known you'd come for her," Tom spat, literally spitting out blood at me. It had run from his nose into his mouth; a disgusting sight. "After all these years, you think you can just waltz back here and be the savior, huh? You think you can save the fucking day, is that right?"

I glared at him, almost unblinking. If he knew me, he'd know I was no hero. He would know I was more than capable of handling him with one arm and my eyes closed. He'd know he was no match for me.

But he didn't know me. Tom did not know what I did for a living, nor did he know what his second wife had been. I did not come from a family of heroes; I came from the opposite.

We were the night. We were the hired terror, slipping through your door when you weren't paying attention, ready to slit your throat and end your life. We were the darkness, hiding in plain sight during the day. We weren't heroes. If anything, we were villains.

And villains had no qualms about killing.

"You laid your hands on her," I growled out. Usually I tried my best to keep calm when about to pounce on someone, but this asshole really made it hard. Seeing him choke Taylor... how the fuck could I be calm when I wanted to rip this man apart limb from limb? "You will come to regret it." That was a promise.

He smirked, so oblivious to the danger facing him, his smugness so unwarranted. "I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be." I didn't say anything else, mostly because he lumbered forward in an attempt to hit me, but I redirected his fist away from my face. Soon enough I had my hands wrapped around his neck, squeezing as hard as I could.

You get what you give, right? Do unto others as you would have done unto you. I was karma's dark messenger, ready to

give retribution, and I would give karma its fill of Tom today.

My arms snapped straight as I choked him, and my arms were longer than his. Our position negated anything he tried to do. No matter how he sought to hit me, his hands couldn't quite reach me.

I stared deep into his eyes, watching as the realization hit him: I wasn't going to stop. I wouldn't release him. His skin turned red, then a little purple, and his eyes bugged out of his skull a bit, widening in abject horror. He sputtered, he spat, he tried to peel my hands off his neck, but I was too strong. A fly like him could not push away the inevitable.

I didn't know how long it was until he began to fade, his struggling becoming less and less. Eventually, his legs gave out and he couldn't keep himself up anymore, so I lowered us down to the floor, in much the same position I'd found him and Taylor in. My hands fit snugly around his neck, his eyes starting to roll back into his skull. He was seconds from passing out, his brain deprived of oxygen for too long... and then death would come.

How many times had I ended someone's life? I'd lost count. Still, with however many times it had happened, not once had anything ever stopped me. Once started, I never pulled back, not when it came to doling out the sweet release only death could bring.

But Taylor called my name, her voice hoarse and rough, "Creed." She said my name like no one else, and hearing her voice made my hands lessen on Tom's neck—not a lot, but enough to give him some respite.

She must've crawled her way over to us, because the next thing I knew, I felt her hand on my back, its warmth flooding me and calming the righteous fury inside. "Creed," she spoke my name again in a whisper, "don't."

*Don't.* That word echoed in my mind as I glared at her dad. Everyone always asked me to stop. Usually those people were the ones at the end of my gun. Never had someone told me so calmly to stop, to refrain from handing out justice, to keep myself from killing.

She wasn't just anyone, though. She was Taylor, and as I was slow in turning my head toward her, I knew it then: I couldn't kill this motherfucker. Not now. Not like this, in front of her.

The expression in Taylor's green eyes was one of pure emotion, pleading and gentle at the same time. "Let him go," she told me, showcasing the fact that she was a much better person than me. If I was her, I'd want him dead. If I was her, I probably would've killed him myself by now just to free myself from him.

No one else in the world could've gotten me to stop. Literally no one else. Out of the billions of people on this planet, only Taylor could stop me. I wasn't sure if that made me a strong man or a weak one.

Did it matter?

I never broke eye contact with Taylor as my hands released Tom's neck. The man's top half fell back, his head hitting the floor; he was barely conscious, mumbling incoherently with a dry, cracked voice.

Taylor smiled at me, my prize for letting him go. "Let's go." She stood, holding out a hand for me to take. She wanted me to take that hand and go with her, to come home with me and never have to think about this man again.

I slipped my hand into hers, standing with her. We stared into each other's eyes for a few moments, the seconds ticking by one after another. Her neck was still red, but the skin on her face had calmed somewhat. Still, she'd wear another bruise around her neck for a while, and that was something I simply could not forgive. I might be able to let it go now, for Taylor's sake—because she asked me to—but not forever.

One day, Tom's time would come, and when it did, I'd be there.

I turned my face to Tom on the floor. "If I see you around again, I won't let her stop me." A warning, one the man would heed if he wanted to continue living. Staying away wouldn't

save him forever; I could not promise when I'd come for him, but I would. Mark my words.

I never left a job unfinished, and this was perhaps the most important job of them all.

Together, Taylor and I walked out of her room, hand in hand, leaving her dad on the ground, his face all bloody and bruised. His neck was in much worse shape already. What could I say? I went in for the kill.

Taylor didn't say anything until we got in my car, and once we were on the road, she whispered, "Thank you for coming for me." She stared at me with those big, green eyes, the look of gratitude plain on her beautiful face. "I don't know what I'd do without you." Her voice was still sore, but she sounded better than she had earlier.

I reached a hand over the center console, squeezing hers. "I'll always come for you, Taylor. Always. You're mine, now and forever." I loved this girl more than life itself. I loved her to an extent I'd never thought love was possible. To say I'd do anything for her would be a gross understatement.

I wouldn't just do *anything*. I'd do *everything*. I'd do it all, regardless of if it was necessary. I'd be whoever she wanted me to be, do everything she wanted me to do. I would be there for her until the day death itself took me.

"I love you," she whispered out the words, giving me a tiny smile. She only had eyes for me, like the rest of the world didn't exist, and she gazed intently at me as I drove us home.

Words could not describe how badly in love I was with her, so I settled with saying, "I love you, too." Now and forever. Forever and always. Nothing would take me away from her again. Not my duty to the Guild, not my Black Wolf namesake, nothing.

It'd been a bumpy ride, but life was only beginning for us.

# Epilogue

## Chapter Twenty-One – Taylor

It really was crazy how quickly you could get used to things. It was also crazy how much life could change in the span of a year. Take, for instance: one year ago, I'd been living with my deadbeat dad, accepting his abuse and all the harsh words he'd throw at me, because I'd thought I had to. I'd taken out loans to go to college, balanced schoolwork with housework, and did the best I could.

Now? Now I didn't have to worry about any of that. No housework done all by myself—Creed and I split it. Cooking was much the same, though we did order in a lot. And as for taking out more loans for my education... let's just say Creed was paying for my classes. Temporarily. Until I got a job and was able to pay him back.

And he'd gone ahead and bought me a car of my own, the jerk.

Of course, Creed didn't want me to pay him back for anything. I think it was him wanting to make up for leaving me with my dad ten years ago. But, honestly, I didn't think he had anything to make up for. It wasn't like he could've taken me with him. I was nine years old at the time, and he wasn't my legal guardian.

If he'd been my legal guardian... the situation we were in now would be a lot, let's just say, ickier.

It was a Friday, and Beth and I actually had a class together, so we often walked to it together after lunch. She'd gotten a boyfriend that she couldn't stop talking about; it was her main topic of conversation more often than it wasn't. And as for me, I'd finally confessed to her who my mystery man was. Not all of the details, but enough to give her the good, juicy bits. How Creed was my stepbrother, how my dad didn't approve of the relationship, how he had no social media accounts because of his work.



Let's just say I knew more about Creed's work now, too. Security was a cover. He worked for something called the Guild; it was the same place his mom had worked before she'd died. He wasn't allowed to have social media accounts, and he wasn't allowed to tell me all of the details. All he'd said was it was contract work, and sometimes it was dangerous.

I'd asked about his mom, if the work had been *too* dangerous for her, but he'd been vague about it, which I took to mean he didn't really want to speak about it, so I'd let it go.

I didn't like the idea that Creed's job was dangerous. The absolute last thing I wanted was for him to never come home one day, but I had faith in him. Maybe a strange amount of faith. I believed he'd come home to me no matter what the job was. He'd fight tooth and nail for me. I knew that beyond a shadow of a doubt.

As for my dad, he'd done his part. He'd stayed away, which was good—I didn't think Creed would stop himself from passing the point of no return if he tried to take me again. Even now, I could easily recall the look on Creed's face when he had his hands wrapped around my dad's throat. Like it'd been easy for him to hurt him... I supposed because he'd hurt me.

Creed didn't scare me. I felt safest when he was near, but I could definitely see how he frightened others. So tall and intimidating, he was the epitome of handsome and danger all rolled into one.

And he was all mine.

Class let out, and Beth and I walked through the building together. She preferred to carry her books; she was taking fewer classes this semester, so she refused to lug around a bag like me. Her black hair had been cut short to her shoulders; the haircut suited her face.

"JD's taking me to see his parents this weekend," she was busy saying as we headed down the stairs side by side, along with a whole host of other students trying to escape campus as quickly as they could, to take advantage of the weekend. "I'm so nervous."

“Why?” I asked. I’d met him quite a few times; he was really nice. Nice and sweet, the kind of guy I never would’ve thought would be right for Beth, but after seeing them together, it made sense. It just did.

“I’ve never met someone’s parents before, not officially,” she told me. We made it to the ground floor of the building and headed toward the nearest exit. “It’s like, making things too real.”

That got me to laugh. “And things weren’t real before?”

“No! I mean... I guess, but not like this. Meeting parents makes everything a lot more real.” Beth let out a huge sigh before adding, “You wouldn’t get it. Dating your stepbrother is totally different.”

I chuckled again.

“But enough about my plans for the weekend.” She paused as we pushed out of the building, into the bright light of day. “What about you? What are you and Creed doing?” She always deflected when she was getting uncomfortable, and I always let her, because I wasn’t one to poke and prod.

“He’s actually picking me up. He’s got plans he won’t tell me—”

We made it to the sidewalk. Beth practically bounced with excitement. “Ooh, a surprise?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I didn’t sound as enthused as I could’ve been, mostly because only recently had surprises become an exciting thing. Before Creed, coming from someone who was kind of a loser in school thanks to her dad and self-esteem issues, surprises were always bad. Bad or cruel, take your pick.

“Well, you’ll have to tell me all about it,” Beth said. We reached the part of the walk where we parted ways, and she grinned, bumped arms with me, and then walked off, saying, “Wish me luck!”

“Good luck!” I yelled after her, smiling in spite of myself. Beth would do just fine this weekend, I was sure of it. As long as she was herself, meeting JD’s parents would be easy. I’d bet

she would have more stories to tell come Monday than me... although, I thought that, and I had no idea where Creed was taking me tonight.

I got out my phone, texting him that I was done with my classes for the day. He texted back instantly, telling me to meet him in front of the student parking garage, where most of the commuters parked their cars during class. He'd gotten me a car, but this morning I hadn't been allowed to drive it, for whatever reason. He wanted to take me out, which I thought was a little odd.

Odd because when given the choice between a night out with me and a night in, he always chose the latter. Creed would much rather be stuck in his bed than somewhere where he couldn't have his hands or his mouth all over me.

Yeah. Even though a year had passed, he was just as ravenous as he'd been in the beginning. Not going to lie, sex had become something I looked forward to with Creed. He knew how to touch me, how to make me go crazy, how to make me beg for more—and he enjoyed every single second of it.

Creed must've been waiting for me nearby, because his sleek, black car was idling there, waiting for me, by the time I arrived at the parking garage. I got in the passenger's seat, setting my bag on the ground near my feet and leaning over the center console to kiss him.

Every kiss with Creed was earth-shattering. There were no easy kisses with a man like him; something I'd learned in the beginning. Even the short ones took hold of your soul and refused to let go until the kiss was over.

“So, where are we going?” I asked, unable to help it. Beating around the bush wasn't my specialty anymore.

He tossed a glance in my direction, smirking. “You'll see.” He got us on the road, not saying a thing more, refusing to tell me the details. “We do have to make one stop, first.”

I tried asking him about where this stop was, but he wouldn't say. So, I settled into the seat and watched the blocks

go by. I couldn't lie; I was a strange sort of excited. It wasn't often that Creed wanted to go out and do something, especially on a Friday night. It was almost like tonight was a special occasion or something.

As it turned out, the pitstop was the Hooting Owl, and I was told to come inside with him—which I found a little strange, but I went along with it. After all, the Hooting Owl did have a place in my heart. It's where I first saw Creed after a long ten years of missing him.

The inside of the bar wasn't busy. A pair of people stood in the back, playing pool and drinking beer, but that was it. Not its busiest hour, but I assumed once the afternoon wore on and night fell, it'd get a hell of a lot busier.

As we walked in, we saw Jeff was working behind the counter. He was currently scrubbing something down with a damp towel, but when he noticed it was us, he stopped and grinned. "Hey, guys! Long time no see." His brown eyes shifted to me, and he nodded in my direction.

It wasn't really a long time. I came here to do homework when Creed was gone on jobs; I'd come to know Jeff pretty well. I think Jeff was the only guy Creed trusted around me—relatively. He got insanely jealous anytime any other guy so much as looked at me or breathed in my general direction.

"What can I do for you today?" Jeff asked, his gaze shifting to Creed.

"Is she here?" he asked.

"She's in the back."

Creed looked at me. "I'll only be a few minutes. Wait here." With one stern look to Jeff, he walked off, heading to the back of the bar, toward the door that was labeled *employees only*. He wasn't an employee here, but from what he'd told me, his boss at the Guild frequented the place. The Guild might own the Hooting Owl or something. I wasn't one hundred percent sure on the details.

As I slid onto a stool near Jeff, Jeff deadpanned, "Well, I see he's as chipper as ever."

I smiled. The word *chipper* wasn't something I'd ever use to describe Creed, but I didn't correct him on it.

"So," Jeff paused, leaning his elbows down on the counter, "how are your classes going, little lady? I hope you're not letting that one distract you too much." He was only a few years older than Creed, so probably around fifteen or so years older than me, but once he'd taken to calling me that, there was no stopping him. I was now a little lady to him.

I mean, I was short, yeah, but I wasn't a child. Come on.

"They're going. Since it's my third year, I'm taking a lot of higher-level classes. Feels like I have a paper a week to write." Anyone could hear the misery in my voice. I didn't mind writing papers, but when it was all I seemed to do, it got old.

"I can't even imagine. I hate reading the labels on shit. I'd be fucked if I had to do half the stuff you do," Jeff said.

I laughed quietly. We talked for a bit more, but then Creed emerged from the back, an expression on his face I couldn't read. I'd been around him enough to know it was his business face; he wore a pretty good mask when he was dealing with work.

Although, even now, I had no idea why he'd have to talk to his boss here and not at the Guild's actual physical location. I could ask him, but I wasn't stupid. The Guild didn't sound like a normal company, and with how secretive he'd been about it when I'd first come to him, I knew there had to be more. It was dangerous, and that's all I needed to know.

Creed headed straight for me, and when he reached me, he slipped a hand on my lower back. "Let's go," he said, and with a quick glimpse at Jeff, he added, "See you." He didn't really mean it. Creed didn't have friends, nor was he in a rush to get them. Before me, he'd lived a very solitary life... although, he had forgone his solitude once a month for Hailee, but I did my best not to think about that woman and what they did together before my arrival back into his life.

As he led me away from the bar counter and out of the bar, I asked, "Where to now?"

All Creed did was smirk.

Him and that smirk. He was lucky he smirked so well, lucky that it only made his unbelievably good looks more mischievous.

He brought me back to the car, and we drove away, to our next destination. I had no idea where we were going, but it wasn't home. I knew that much.

Turned out, we were going to some fancy shop on the floor of a medium-sized high-rise somewhere downtown. A clothing store, but not one just anyone could stroll into and pick from the racks. This place had no racks to be browsed; there were simply mannequins and workers who checked in the back to see if they had your size available.

Creed and I walked up to the woman behind the register toward the front. "I called earlier," he said. "For Taylor." He reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet, flashing a gold credit card.

The woman smiled at us. "Oh, yes. I remember. Come in the back. I have everything ready." She didn't take the credit card; I assumed she'd take it later to charge him after we... did whatever we were doing in the back.

We followed her through the store. There weren't many other people there, and the type of customers that were didn't seem like the kind of people who'd break into a cash register. And, let's be honest: a cash register at a place like this probably didn't have much cash in it to begin with. Most transactions were so expensive it was all plastic.

Around a corner, we came upon a waiting room of sorts, where a group of sofas and chairs were, facing a small area with a half circle of well-lit mirrors. Deeper in was a changing room.

"The woman helping you today is Megan. I'll go grab her from the front." She gave us another smile and was off, hurrying away on her two-inch heels.

I was slow in turning my head toward Creed. "Where the heck are we going tonight?" This had to be for me; I hadn't

seen any men's clothes anywhere. This was purely a women's boutique.

A boutique. Was that what it was called? I had no idea.

Creed stepped closer to me, setting his hands on my hips and drawing me in to him. One of his hands lifted to my chin, angling my head back and forcing me to gaze deep into those dark eyes of his. "You'll see," he whispered, and then he lowered his mouth to mine, kissing away any other questions I might've had.

Seriously, even now, it was hard to think while kissing Creed. He had that kind of power over me.

When he pulled his mouth off mine, he added, "Choose whichever you want. You'll be wearing it out of here." He let me go just as a different woman strolled around the partition separating this area of the store from the rest.

I'd be wearing it out of here? I took that to mean we were going somewhere fancy afterward.

I mean, yes, Creed always dressed nicely. If he wasn't wearing a full-blown suit, he was at least wearing dark slacks with a leather belt and a long-sleeved button-up shirt. He never wore jeans or t-shirts. He always dressed like he was ready to go to a work meeting.

The woman spoke to us, "Hello. My name is Megan. I'll be helping you today. Would either of you like champagne?"

Champagne while shopping? Damn, this place was fancy.

I shook my head no, while Creed said, "No, thank you. A few dresses should be waiting already. I called ahead."

The woman nodded. "Right. Of course." Her eyes moved to me. I could tell the smile she wore was fake; working at a place like this, she was probably forced to smile through every single second of it. "Follow me. We'll get started."

I wasn't exactly comfortable here, but the sooner we got started, the sooner we could be done. Hell, I was half-tempted to stick with whatever outfit I was given to put on first, just so we could be out of here. This wasn't my kind of place,

obviously. I looked like a bum compared to the other customers I'd seen.

The worker brought me to a changing room further in the back, where a few black dresses hung on the walls. There was no door to the changing room, just a curtain that could be drawn closed.

“Do you need help?” she asked.

“Um, no, I got it, thanks.” Having a stranger help me get dressed was the last thing I wanted, so once she left, drawing the curtain closed behind her, I started to take off my clothes, setting them on a small bench in the corner of the space. I left on my underwear and my bra, not sure if the dresses had built-in pads around the chest or not. Sometimes dresses did, sometimes they didn't.

My eyes surveyed the dresses before me. Three of them, and they were all gorgeous. All black, varying lengths. One looked like it ended halfway between my knees and ankles, while two of them looked to be knee-length. All of them sheer, with no added bedazzlements. One had a weird kind of thing around the neck, the fabric tight around the neck while exposing some of your chest, right above your boobs—I decided I wouldn't even try that one on.

I went with my gut, going for the slightly longer dress. It had two thick straps that clung to your shoulder on either side, a zipper that was on the left side of the dress, neatly tucked between the silk fabric so it wouldn't be seen. It showed no extra bits of skin, no low dip in the back and no slit up the side near your leg. Its chest was padded, so I had to take my bra off in the end.

Once I got it on, I couldn't even see myself in the mirror; these rooms had no mirrors. I guess I had to walk out and look at myself in the mirrored area in front of Creed.

I had no shoes on, but I didn't let that stop me. I left the changing room, walking toward Creed and the worker. I could tell as I approached, Creed liked the dress, that he approved of it. He always got this certain look in his eyes, a hunger that only I could see, when I looked extra good.



It wasn't often I wore fancy clothes. Even though he had money and could buy me whatever, I still stuck with leggings and baggy shirts anytime I could.

"Oh, my," Megan spoke, clapping her hands together as she walked toward me, helping me up on the platform so I could get a good look at myself in the mirror. Two steps up from the ground. "You look beautiful."

Staring at myself in the mirrors, at all angles, all I could do was nod. I did look beautiful, even with no shoes on and no makeup, even with my hair a wild mess. The black dress was simple and elegant, and yet it fit perfectly, clinging to every curve my body had.

"I want to go with this one," I said, spinning to face Megan and Creed. Creed had stood, his eyes busy eating me up, while Megan had moved closer, inspecting me with a much more critical eye.

"Are you sure you don't want to try on the others?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Grab her some heels," Creed said, and Megan nodded once and walked off, disappearing. "You really do look beautiful," he spoke, once it was just us. "Let me go get your clothes out of the room." While he went, I waited. It took him only a minute to come back with my clothes in a neatly-folded pile and my shoes and socks on top. He set them down onto the sofa he'd claimed, and together, we waited for Megan to return with some heels.

In the end, I chose a glittery pair of black heels. The dress was simple and elegant, so I thought to go a little harder when it came to the heels. When Creed called ahead, he must've given them my size, because everything fit.

He paid, and we were out.

But that boutique wasn't the only place we went to. We stopped at a salon, where they washed and dried my hair, styling it afterward. They also did some makeup on me—not

much, mostly because I told them I wasn't a huge fan of makeup in general.

By the time I walked out of there, I looked like a million bucks.

After the salon, Creed took us to a place that had an actual valet. We got out of the car, and Creed handed his keys to the valet, who gave him a ticket in return. He took my arm, hooking mine through his, and together, we entered the building that was mostly glass.

Walking in, I was nearly flabbergasted by how fancy it was. A restaurant, high-end. The kind with tablecloths and waiters wearing all black. The kind where they came to your table to clean off any crumbs you might've made while you were still there. I didn't know that based on experience, but I could see a waiter doing just that right now, past the host as he took our reservation from Creed.

The host picked up two menus, clad in leather so you couldn't even see what exactly they had, and said, "Follow me." He spun on his heel and started to walk, and we trailed after him. He led us to an empty two-person table near the windows. "Your server will be with you shortly." With a bow of his head, he left.

I was too busy looking around, soaking it all in. No wonder Creed had taken me to get dressed and get my hair done before coming here. A place like this, they probably would've turned me away if I would've come looking like I had earlier.

Still, this was very odd, wasn't it? Strange to go out like this, even stranger for Creed to have made it a surprise.

We ordered our drinks and our food once the server came, and it was only after the server brought us our drinks in sparkling glasses that Creed spoke, "Do you know what today is?" His black eyes were on me, the dim light of the restaurant only growing dimmer now that the sun was setting outside. It must've taken longer than I'd thought to get dressed and get my hair done.

“Um, a Friday?” I offered, though I was pretty sure that wasn’t what he was getting at.

“It’s been one year,” he said. “One year to the day. One year since you called me.” He reached over the table, and I set my hand in his, letting his fingers curl around mine. “One year since everything changed.”

As I listened to him speak, I wondered, had it really been one year exactly? Time was a funny thing. It felt so much longer than that, like multiple years had passed, but I knew he was right. It’d been one year. Just one. No more, no less, and it was crazy to think that.

“I never should’ve left you,” Creed went on, squeezing my hand. “I thought I was doing you a favor, but now... now I know I did us both a disservice. I will never leave you again, Taylor, that is a promise.”

I smiled at him. Anything I could’ve said in that moment would’ve surely not been enough. Creed had become everything to me in such a short time; I was well aware that things between us had progressed faster than they would’ve if we’d been strangers—but Creed and I weren’t strangers to each other. We had a past, we had history, and it was because of that history that we were here today.

“I want to continue being yours, and I want you to always be mine,” he spoke, the intensity in his voice as powerful and as strong as always. “You are everything to me.”

Each and every word he spoke made my stomach flip—in a good way. I sat there, feeling like an idiot I was grinning so much, unable to do much else. The world around us didn’t exist; the only thing I saw was Creed. His short brown hair. The stubble lining his square jaw. The warmth in those dark eyes. The way he filled out that suit.

God, he really was drop-dead gorgeous, wasn’t he? He was literally the most handsome man I’d ever seen, and he was all mine. Mine to have. Mine to hold. Mine to love. And to use his words, he would remain so, forever and always.

We'd been through so much together, and I couldn't wait to face the rest of my life with Creed by my side.

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Creed

One year. One year exactly. It was strange to think how much things had changed, and yet, when you got down to it, nothing really had changed. I'd brought Taylor into my life, let myself feel things for her I perhaps shouldn't have, and in turn, she'd developed feelings for me as well, accepted me for who I was.

This girl, I was never going to let her go. That was a promise.

"You're everything to me, too," Taylor whispered, her small hand safely tucked in mine. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Creed." She truly did say my name like no one else in the world; her voice was soft and velvety, something I could close my eyes and listen to all day and night.

She'd never have to go a day without me. She'd never have to know what she'd do without me, because I'd always be there. Always. There was nothing in this world that could keep us apart; if I had to choose between her and my work with the Guild, I'd choose her. Every single time I'd choose her.

The Black Wolf would cease to exist. It would die with me, die the day I walked away from the Guild for good.

I didn't know if that day would ever come, but I wouldn't resist if it did. Taylor was worth giving up everything for, though she'd never ask me to. She wasn't that kind of person—and that's what made me even more willing to do it.

We gazed into each other's eyes for a while, neither one of us saying anything more. When it came time to eat, it was only then that we pulled our hands apart... but even then, our ankles moved to rest against each other's instead. We couldn't not touch each other. We had to be in some kind of contact. Our bodies, our minds, and our hearts craved it.

The food was delicious, but I hardly paid attention to what I was eating, too busy watching Taylor. I couldn't take my

eyes off her. She looked stunning in that dress—it was a very good choice. I didn't blame her for not wanting to try on the others. It fit her perfectly, and I couldn't wait to take it off later tonight.

Tonight. It would be more than just a dinner out. I had something else planned, although I still debated on how to do it.

We took our time eating, and once we were done, we also got dessert. We shared a slice of chocolate cake, although I let her have most of it. Watching her smile as she ate, hearing her hum in approval of the chocolate cake was more than enough for me. I swore, I could watch her all day and all night and never tire of it.

She had me. She had me wrapped around her finger. She knew it by now too, knew she had me hook, line, and sinker. There would never be an escape from the emotions inside, no running from this, from us. We were destiny. We were endgame.

When she was finished, I paid for the meal, and we were off. Once the valet brought my car back to the front of the restaurant, I helped Taylor get inside before walking around it and getting in myself.

Her head rolled on the headrest to look at me, and a soft smile graced her lips. “Don't tell me we're going somewhere else now. I don't know if I can handle going anywhere else. I'm pretty full—”

I shot her a knowing look. “Hopefully you're not that full, because I do have something else in mind. We are going home, though.” I gave her one of my rare smiles, watching as the realization of what I meant dawned on her.

It was funny, watching her blush, even now. Like she still got so surprised and caught off-guard when I made comments that referenced me wanting to devour her whole. Taylor should have come to anticipate that from me by now; anytime I was near her, it was hard to keep my hands and my cock in check.

Taylor bit her bottom lip, not saying a word. Which was fine; I didn't need her to respond. I knew where her mind was going, knew she clenched those thighs together in anticipation of what was to come.

Tonight would be a long night for us, but there was one more surprise I had for her. One more, and this one I knew she'd like.

It took us forty minutes to drive through downtown and get home. Another seven minutes to walk from where I'd parked the car to the elevator to the lobby, and from that lobby to the other elevator to our floor. By the time we reached our place, my cock had started to twitch and harden in eagerness. I couldn't wait to take that dress off her.

I unlocked the door for her and held it open, allowing her to walk in first, and when she did, she stopped after ten or so feet. "Oh," Taylor whispered, "wow." The lights in the apartment were dimmed, but not only that, I'd gone out and bought a shit ton of fake candles, scattering them everywhere in the place. On the island in the kitchen, along the trim on the floor, on the back edge of the couch in the living room.

Let's just say I was going for the ambiance, for a dark, sensual mood.

"Creed, what is all this?" Taylor turned to face me, her mouth drawn into a wide smile. She let out a short gasp when I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her in close, planting a kiss on her forehead.

I didn't answer her. Instead, I took her by the hand and led her through the entryway, past the kitchen and living room, to the hall. I stopped only when I brought her into my bedroom, where the lights were completely off—but there were enough fake candles flickering to illuminate the room enough.

"I can't believe you did all this," Taylor was busy murmuring while I got to work on finding the zipper on her dress, running my hands up and down her back, trying to find it. When I couldn't find the damned thing, she lifted her left arm and added with a chuckle, "It's on the side."

Figured.

I found it with her help, unzipping it slowly. Once it was all the way down, the dress loosened around her body, and I was able to push the shoulder straps off and tug the entire dress down, exposing her back to me, along with the pair of panties she wore. Nothing else was beneath that dress.

Taylor helped by stepping out of her heels and away from the dress that had piled around her ankles. She turned to me. “Where were you hiding all of these candles?”

“They came today, while you were in class,” I told her, running my hands down along her sides, hooking my thumbs into her panties. Shadows danced across her face, and we locked eyes. Without another word, I tugged her panties down, lowering myself to my knees in order to do so.

I heard her inhale sharply, and I growled out, “Get on the bed, on your back.” As I stood, Taylor did as I told her to; she turned around, giving me a nice view of her round, plump ass, and she crawled onto the bed, rolling onto her back.

I stepped closer to the bed, slipping off my shoes. I ran my hands down the front of my suit jacket, feeling something in my pocket. Something small, something I’d taken out of its box so it wouldn’t be obvious I had something there.

My initial thought was at the restaurant, but I think this suited us much better. Let’s just say it wouldn’t be a story we could tell our kids.

I took off my suit jacket, careful in how I folded it. I left the pocket in question up as I set it on my nightstand, going for my belt next. That I let drop to the floor. My cock was hard as steel now, but I didn’t let it free; I didn’t take off anything else as I crawled onto the bed, situating myself between her legs after spreading them wide.

In the dim, flickering light of the room, I could see the beautiful space between her thighs. It waited for me, waited to feel my tongue run along it, waited to have my fill. And I would. I would have my fill of Taylor’s pussy. I wouldn’t stop until I did.



“I want to hear you,” I spoke, getting in position near her sex. “I want to hear you come as you moan.” I gave her no other instruction; she knew what to do. She knew I wanted her to be as loud as her lungs could possibly be.

With my initial instruction given, I brought my mouth to her clit, licking that tiny nub along the side, right where I knew she liked it. The action made her squirm a bit, a soft moan coming from her instantly. I was good with my mouth, a master, and when it came to Taylor, it really didn't take much to push her off the edge.

I licked and I sucked her clit, toying with the lips of her pussy with my fingers. She shivered, she moaned, she writhed. Her breathing hitched, her body growing warmer. The only sounds that came from her were the sounds of pure pleasure, heated and unrestrained. She became instant putty in my hands, or in my mouth, rather, a slave to the sensations I gave her.

Eventually I lowered my mouth away from her clit, taking my tongue to her pussy. I could taste her arousal, knowing it'd been building ever since I'd made that comment in the car. My fingers lifted, moving to toy with her clit while I ate out her pussy.

That got her to moan louder and her fingers to clench the sheets harder. Taylor arched her back, her hips starting to move against me.

Eating Taylor out was like dining on a feast. Looking down at it, you knew exactly what you were going to get, and plenty of it, but when the moment came to actually taste the feast, you were reminded of just how wondrous it was.

And she was wondrous indeed.

The sounds coming from her got louder and louder as I rubbed her clit and fucked her with my tongue. I could tell she was getting close to her precipice when the grinding of her hips slowed down and what movement was left was erratic and jerky, and it only caused me to work harder at bringing the orgasm out.

The taste of her, the smell of her... it was all very addicting. I couldn't get enough. It was easy for me to shower her pussy and her clit with pressure and attention, knowing her wetness would only serve to make it feel better once I speared her with my cock.

Fuck. I couldn't wait to be inside her.

I kept up the pressure with my fingers around her clit, using my tongue to push her to the brink. Taylor's breathing caught, and she tensed up, her muscles tightening before spasming of their own accord. She let out a cry of bliss, louder than any sound she'd made up until that point, her body wracked with heated pleasure.

I was slow in withdrawing my tongue from her pussy, even slower in removing my hand from her clit. I gazed up at her from between her thighs, at the way her chest rose and fell with each haggard breath, how her nipples were hard and pointed, signaling just how turned on she was.

I propped myself up to my knees, kneeling as I finally went to undo the buttons on my shirt. I never broke eye contact with her as I took it off, nor did I look away when I started to undo my pants. It did take a bit of finagling to get those off without crawling off her and standing, but I managed, and soon enough my cock was free, precum dripping along its tip, ready to feel her pussy walls around its length.

God, she was beautiful. Undone from an orgasm, her hair a mess, her tits still heaving. She was fucking gorgeous. I couldn't believe she was all mine.

I crawled over her, taking a hand to her jaw and angling her head up to me. Her eyelids were heavy, her pupils dilated in the darkness. She breathed through her mouth, hard, heavy breaths left over from the orgasm.

"You're going to come again," I instructed her, "this time around my cock. You're going to come for me like a good girl, right?"

All Taylor could do was nod, and I let go of her chin, taking both hands to her tits and tweaking her nipples. A fluttery moan left her as I did so. Leaving one hand to toy with her tits, the other reached down between us, running along my cock. My balls already felt the pressure; I wanted to come desperately, but I'd wait until I was inside that sweet cunt before letting loose.

We locked eyes once more, and I bore my hips down, pushing myself inside her inch after inch until she couldn't take any more of me. I filled her pussy up to the brim, and then some. And, fuck, she fit me like a glove, her core tight and wet. Nothing at all beat natural lubrication, not when it came to fucking.

The hand that had run along my cock moved to weave through her hair, and I lowered my body against hers as I began to rock my hips, fucking her with a steady pace. Not wildly—not yet. I wanted to draw it out a little bit more.

I pulled on her hair tightly, making her moan again. As I stared down at her, all I could think was: *I love this girl. I love her so much I can't think straight.*

Staring down at her, watching her reaction to being pumped full of cock, filled me with a smug appreciation I couldn't get anywhere else. Seriously, Taylor made me feel so alive. Nothing and no one would take her from me.

“You're so gorgeous when my cock is inside you,” I murmured in approval, watching her eyelids flutter at the compliment. “And the sounds you make... Taylor, you make me want to lose it.”

She could barely get out the words, “Then lose it.”

I smirked. “Not until you come for me again.” I picked up my pace, fucking her harder, dragging my cock in and out of her pussy like a wild animal. The bed rocked beneath us, a signal of how hard I went at her.

Her eyes shut as she took every thrust of my hips, every pump of my cock into that wet, tight hole between her legs. Sweat lined her pores, her body in tune with mine as we

fucked. She was at a fever pitch; every deep thrust from me made her cry out. I pulled on her hair a little harder, exposing her neck to me, and I lowered my lips to her jaw, kissing a trail from her jaw to her earlobe to her neck as I fucked her.

That got her to come again, and this time, instead of clutching the sheets beneath her, her hands found my sides, gripping me as tight as she could while she orgasmed. Taylor's husky voice cried out again, and this time, I could feel her inner core clamping down on my length, milking me as she came.

Hearing her come, feeling her pussy tighten on my cock, made the animal in me lose it. I came mere seconds after her, groaning as I emptied my cock into her. Shot after shot of cum, I filled her up, the pleasure so thick in me I couldn't see straight.

My hips stopped moving when the orgasm's hold on me lessened, but I didn't pull out of her. I breathed hard, as did she, but I still managed to whisper, "Good girl." And then I angled her head up at me and kissed her. A fierce kind of kiss, the kind that was so intense it would've made my cock harden if it wasn't still already. "I have one more surprise for you."

Taylor didn't get the chance to ask what it was; I wrapped an arm around her and, with my cock still inside her, rolled us to the edge of the bed, where I could reach my folded-up jacket. With my arm outstretched, I could barely reach the pocket on top, but I managed. My fingers grasped the small item inside, and I pulled it out, keeping it in my closed palm so she wouldn't be able to see what it was.

Taylor chuckled softly, clinging to me as she watched me do it. "What is that?" she asked, eyes on my hand as I once again got comfortable above her.

"It's your last present tonight," I murmured, reaching for her left hand and moving it so it rested between us. With my cock still nestled inside her, I made no moves to pull out. I wanted to be one with her when I gave it to her.

I opened my palm, taking the small, round object in my fingers. Taylor's breathing caught when she saw what it was,

her expression changing into one of stunned silence. Her lips parted, but she said not a word as I took the ring and slid it up her left ring finger.

Now the whole world would know she was taken. One look at the silver band with a sparkling diamond on top and they'd know she was off the market.

This girl was mine.

“Someday soon, you're going to marry me. We'll get a house, have kids—or not, if you don't want them. You're mine, Taylor, and I want the world to know it.”

She fiddled with the ring on her hand with her thumb, slow to draw her gaze back to me. The same hand went to the side of my face, her fingertips drawing down along it as she smiled. “Most people ask the question. They don't just say it.”

It was my turn to smirk, and I lowered my forehead to rest against hers. “Like I'd give you the chance to say no to me.”

It wasn't that I wasn't giving her a choice... it's more so that there was no way in hell she'd say no. She'd never say no to me.

Taylor giggled, and I brought my mouth to hers, kissing her hard and fast, swallowing up any other response she might've had. I wanted this girl so badly she made me feel insane. Everything I was, everything I would be... I was nothing without her. She made me feel alive, breathed life into me in a way no one else could.

Taylor was mine, and I proved that fact to her all night, again and again. I wore us both out, our bodies giving in to sleep around four in the morning, after countless orgasms on both our parts.

When morning came, when the sunlight streaming in through the windows was too strong to ignore, I got up and made breakfast. I let Taylor sleep in, bringing in a tray to surprise her with once everything was done. Bacon, eggs, pancakes, the works.

Her messy bedhead was adorable, and I sat and ate with her, unable to take my eyes off her. She really was beautiful. I

couldn't believe this was where we ended up.

"I have to run out, something for work, but I should be back before lunch," I told her. "If there's anything you want to do tonight—" Taylor shrugged, her mouth full of bacon. "Just think about it." I went to kiss her cheek, getting up to take a shower. Once that was done, I got dressed in a pitch-black suit.

Taylor had finished her hearty breakfast by then, walking with me to the door, where she stood on her tiptoes and waited for me to kiss her on those deliciously supple lips. I bent my top half down, meeting her halfway.

"I love you," I whispered to her once the kiss was over, and she grinned.

"I love you, too."

We couldn't say those words enough to each other.

Even though I hated leaving her, I did just that. My steps were purposeful, and my jaw ground as I went down the elevator. I hadn't lied to Taylor about where I was going, but I also didn't tell the whole truth.

It was for work... or, rather, it was because of work's connections that I had somewhere to go. I'd stopped by the Hooting Owl yesterday with Taylor to speak with the Lioness away from headquarters to make sure everything was ready.

The Guild didn't often accept jobs from its own members, let alone jobs that didn't require killing, but there were exceptions to every rule, and doing what we did, the Guild was well aware that sometimes there might be the occasional asshole who needed a different kind of justice.

The slow kind.

And so the Guild had a warehouse built just outside the city limits, with security up the ass. No one got in unless they worked for the Guild, and even then, you were only allowed to go in your specific cell. That's where I was going today.

You see, I'd gotten Taylor a ring, but I'd also gotten myself something to celebrate.

Someone, you could say.

I drove to the warehouse, forced to have a pat-down once inside the barrier. At the gate prior, you had to submit to a retinal scan for it to open. You couldn't bring your own weapons here; anything you might need, the Guild had ready and waiting.

I walked inside the warehouse, greeted by what looked to be an office space. It wasn't, though. The front desk where a young woman sat was nothing more than a front. She looked up at me when I entered, typed something in on her computer, and then spoke, "Black Wolf. Do you need me to take you down to the H-corridor?"

H for Hill, Taylor's last name. It's where my present to myself was waiting.

"No, thank you. I got it." I'd been in the warehouse a few times, on business for the Lioness. This was the first time I was here for me... but it wouldn't be my last.

I walked around the front desk, heading to the right. Hallway after hallway, I passed countless of doors. No windows, so you couldn't see in. The empty cells had no signs on the wall beside them, but the ones that contained people had files resting in clear plastic slots on the walls.

Turn after turn, I eventually made it deep into the warehouse, to the H-corridor, where my destination was. I found the door marked with Hill and input the code the Lioness had told me yesterday into the keypad beside the door handle. It clicked open, allowing me to walk inside.

Each room here was different. Some were simply holding cells, while others were more like torture chambers. This particular room was somewhere in between, mostly because I hadn't spilled any blood in it, yet.

The room was filled with nothing more than a toilet and a bed bolted to the floor. A man sat on the bed, his wrists chained in thick manacles, tying him to the bed. When he saw me enter, he stood, pulling his chains taut—and then he realized it was me, and his face twisted into a scowl.

He'd looked better, I'd admit, but he'd look a whole lot worse by the time I was done with him.

"Creed," Tom spat at me. He couldn't come at me because of the chains. "What the hell is this? Where am I? Let me go, you motherfucker—" Even though he clearly wasn't the one in charge, he acted as if he was. It was quite amusing.

I leaned against the metal door behind me, folding my hands in front of my abdomen as I stared at him. "I'm afraid you'll never get out of here. I haven't forgotten what you did to Taylor. She might've forgiven you, but I cannot. It's not in my blood to forgive. Do you know what *is* in my blood, Tom?"

He said not a word, his ugly face frowning.

I was never one for torture. I always got the job done in the manner it should be done, never taking my time, not relishing in the act itself.

That wouldn't be the case here. This asshole deserved every single ounce of pain I'd give him. He'd take it all until he could take no more, and when death itself whispered into his ear, telling him that it would take him away for good, I'd make sure his final moments were ones of pure pain and misery. I owed him that much, with the years he'd abused Taylor.

"Death," I finally told him. "And my creed demands yours."



AHH! I hope you enjoyed reading about Creed and Taylor, guys! Not gonna lie, I shipped these two SO. FREAKING. HARD. Seriously. During the first half, I felt like a giddy kid playing with dolls, making them kiss after hours and hours of playtime.

If you enjoyed it, please please please leave a review/rating if you can, especially on Amazon. M/F romances aren't what I usually write, so if you want to see more, please tell me! Please share the book anywhere you think would love it. Reader recs mean so much more than author self-recs.

If you enjoyed this, you might enjoy some stuff on my other pen name. My next release is actually another M/F romance (!!! Another one, I know!!!)... but this one more taboo than a stepsibling. The title is Rot, and you can find it here.

Don't forget to follow me anywhere you can for updates!  
<https://linktr.ee/candacewondrak>