



HE'LL FIGHT FOR HER

DARK

THE ADAIR LEGACY: BOOK 5

KNIGHT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.L. DONN

Dark Knight

Adair Legacy

Book 5

KL Donn



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Dedication

For everyone who thinks they aren't worthy of love, you most certainly are and I hope one day you know it as passionately as I do.

Adair Empire/Legacy

Family Tree

- King & Lilith Adair ([King: Adair Empire Book 1](#))
- **Holden** (Noelle) Adair – [Killer Prince: Adair Legacy Book 3](#)
- **Aria** (Seven & Severo) Adair – [Broken Princess: Adair Legacy Book 1](#)

- Luther & Ariel Sutton ([Luther: Adair Empire Book 2](#))
- **Nolan** (Bea) Sutton – [Dark Knight: Adair Legacy Book 5](#)
- **Lake** (Saint) Sutton – [Vicious Saint: Adair Legacy Book 8](#)
- **Damien** (Whitney & Santo) Sutton – [Forbidden Temptress: Adair Legacy Book 9](#)

- Castiel & Talia Adair ([Castiel: Adair Empire Book 3](#))
- **Hadley** (Ashton) Adair – [Tortured Duchess: Adair Legacy Book 2](#)
- **Hendrix** (Miabella) Adair – [Vengeful Pawn: Adair Legacy Book 6](#)

- Atticus & Catalina Kincaid ([Atticus: Adair Empire Book 4](#))
- **Bishop** (Cordelia) Kincaid – [Damaged Bishop: Adair Legacy Book 7](#)
- **Easton** (Stella) Kincaid – [Beautiful Devil: Adair Legacy Book 10](#)

- Carver & Meadow Rivers ([Carver: Adair Empire Book 5](#))
- **Scotlyn** (Jaxson) Rivers – [Delicate Dame: Adair Legacy Book 4](#)
- **Saint** (Lake) Rivers – [Vicious Saint: Adair Legacy Book 8](#)

- Dimitri, Danika, & Daniel Petrov-Corelli ([Trinity: Adair Empire Book 6](#))
- **Seven** (Aria) Petrov-Corelli – [Broken Princess: Adair Legacy Book 1](#)
- **Severo** (Aria) Petrov-Corelli – [Broken Princess: Adair Legacy Book 1](#)
- **Santo** (Damien & Whitney) Petrov-Corelli – [Forbidden Temptress Adair Legacy Book 9](#)

Authors note: *While the **Adair Legacy** books can all be read as complete standalones and, in any order, I do suggest reading the **Adair Empire** series in order of books 1-6.*



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[What's Coming this Year](#)

Blurb

From *USA Today* Bestselling Author KL Donn comes an all-new obsessive, found love, dark contemporary romance.

A boys' trip with my nephew turned into the chance of a lifetime.

Everything was going great until I saw *her*.

The girl with rope around her wrists and confusion in her stare.

And an intriguing tattoo that led to more questions than answers.

As unique as they come, from her name to her illness, she had me twisted up inside.

Bean Plant Daley.

A fucking joke of a name if I've ever heard one.

Only she lives with it daily, along with the teasing it evokes.

After discovering that her family didn't give a crap about her, I decided to bring Bea home with us.

She tried to warn me, but I refused to listen.

I got arrested and charged with kidnapping, and she went missing.

Vanished into thin air. Or so I was led to believe.

They don't want her.

I'll fight to keep her.

I'm coming, Bea, and no one will stop me this time.

A little taboo, a little dark, and whole lot of protective sexy alpha ready and willing to do whatever it takes. Join Nolan Sutton on his search for the one thing he never knew he was missing...love.

Chapter 1

Nolan

“**T**his pole?” Sawyer pops up over the half-raised tent with the small pole for the awning above the door, and I shake my head.

Why the fuck I thought I could do this on my own is beyond me, but my best friend Holden and his wife Noelle needed some time alone before the new baby arrived, so here I am, helpful Uncle Nolan to the rescue. Only camping is a fucking disaster. I should have rented an RV or a cabin, at least.

“This one?” His arm raises triumphantly when I confirm. Watching the kid come out of his shell over the past several months has been nothing short of a miracle.

“You’re really nailing this camping thing, bud.” His boyish grin is the only reason we continue to figure this shit out.

“It’s ‘cause Dad and I camp out back all the time.” He says it like he forgets I’m there half the time too. We have a boys’ night nearly every weekend.

Getting the last pole in place, I hammer in the pegs as Sawyer sits back and watches. “Looks good, yeah?” I glance over at him to see he’s holding the bag of marshmallows with a wily grin on his face. *Damn, kid.* “Dinner first,” I say.

Noelle made me promise to feed him more than just sugar all weekend. We have hotdogs, burgers, some pre-made breakfasts she put together for us, and enough sandwiches to last a lifetime. I don't think Noelle believed I'd bring anything other than marshmallows, water, and beer. "Burgers or hot dogs tonight?"

Popping open the cooler, I begin pulling out the condiments and placing them on the picnic table when he finally answers. "Hot dogs. We can roast everything tonight!" His excitement is contagious.

"Let's go load up on some kindling then."

Jumping to his feet, Sawyer races into the trees to find as many sticks as he can. I trail behind, doing my best to stop searching for trouble when there is none. It can't seem to leave the family alone lately, though. It's been one thing after another, and I'd rather be over-prepared than under. Especially when Sawyer's in my care.

"This enough?" He turns to me with a bundle of sticks and twigs in his arms.

"Should be," I reply. "Don't run with those!" I caution when he jets back to our site.

Sawyer's story is a sad one. The growth in his confidence and his strength is something he must get from his mom because, for damn sure, no man could have the resilience that Noelle does.

"Now what?" Dropping his load next to the fire pit, he awaits my instruction.

"Place them inside like a teepee, with plenty of room in the middle, then bunch up some paper and put it in the center and a few other places around the base. I'm going to chop the

wood.” Acknowledging his understanding, he begins his task while I grab from the back of my truck, the axe I brought and the wood we bought when we arrived.

Finding a spot a safe distance from where Sawyer is working, deep in concentration, I get set up and remove my shirt. It’s been a while since I chopped wood, and I’d forgotten the sweat it worked up from the exertion. Keeping an eye on the kid, I take a swing, and the block splits in half.

“Wow!” I register Sawyer’s voice and look up to catch him sitting back in his chair, now watching me. Covering his mouth with a hand, he points behind me to where the road is, and I groan, already knowing what I’ll see.

A couple of women are walking their dogs past our site and have stopped to watch the show I didn’t mean to put on when I took off my shirt.

“Ladies.” Tipping my head, I turn back around and continue chopping. Sawyer is on the ground rolling with laughter by the time I’ve finished, and as I’m bringing the wood over to the pit, I notice more women have gathered around.

“I feel dirty,” I mutter to the kid while he continues guffawing before I grab the back of his coat and haul him to his feet. “Go get the wood, you shit.”

“Ohhhh, Mom’s going to be mad you swore.” Running before I can grab him again, I know he’s right. Noelle hates when we swear in front of him. I try my best, really, I do. But I’ve spent my life using *fuck* as a replacement for almost every word in the dictionary.

Reaching for my shirt, I’m about to put it on when one of the spectators catches my attention. Rail thin, paler than a

white cloud, curious hazel eyes, dull brown hair, and wearing oversized clothes. She doesn't seem to realize when the group of people she is with has begun walking away, and they don't bother calling for her.

Intrigued, I glance from her to her group and back again, but she seems transfixed on me, conveying something with her eyes, but I haven't a fucking clue what. When she finally jerks back to reality, I'm fucking livid that it's because her wrists are bound with a rope being tugged by one of the older women.

“Uncle Nolan, it's ready! I have the lighter!” Sawyer's comment pulls my focus from the woman, and I rush to his side to make sure he's not trying to light the fire on his own. By the time I look back to where she was, she's gone.

Bea

“God, Bea, you're such a drag.” My half-sister, Amari, laughs with her sister, Elsa, and my stepmother, Flora. The tug on the rope is a reminder that I can't be left alone.

Sometimes, I wander or forget what I'm doing and where I'm going. Who I'm with. At times, I even forget who I am.

“Sorry,” I mumble too low for them to hear my response.

My father rented one of the lake houses at Bliss Lodge and Camping for the summer. *Yippee!* An entire season in unfamiliar territory means my stepmother and half-sisters get to find all new ways to torture me. I don't say anything to my father because it would upset him, and he'd only worry more.

And in spite of his indiscretions with my mother, he won't leave Flora.

I was an accident. Never meant to happen. Father had an affair with the woman who gave birth to me. A woman who was so addicted to drugs that she disappeared during her entire pregnancy, high as a kite, and ensured that I would have brain damage for the rest of my life.

Nobody even knew I existed until she died from an overdose a day after giving birth to me. She got in one last parting shot, though.

Naming me Bean Plant Daley.

Life has been grand.

On more than one occasion, I've been tempted to end my life. Just check out and never feel this emptiness again. The trouble is, I can't; I know it would hurt Daddy. And despite his flaws, he does love me. He favors me over Amari and Elsa, and they use that as an excuse to torment me. Flora has never liked me. I'm the bane of her existence.

"He was so hot. Did you see the way his muscles flexed while he cut that wood?" Amari cackles to Elsa. They're obsessed with sleeping around. Always wanting something, someone new to throw in the other's face.

"Puh-lease. He had eyes for me," Elsa snarks, tugging on the rope as I continue to look back, hoping he'll follow. But I know he won't; he has a little boy. Rightfully so, he wouldn't risk the child to follow some woman just because I felt a spark when he caught my eye.

The way he looked at me, I felt seen for the first time in my life. I felt like someone saw past the drab girl I am and through to the lonely soul begging for mercy.

As we approach the lake house on the other side of the campsites, the rope is dropped, and I'm free to wander the property.

"For the love of god, Bean, don't get lost. I'm not sending out another search party for you," Flora snaps as I head towards the inviting swing in the sand by the water.

Nodding at her, I keep my head down, quickly getting lost in my thoughts as I remove the rope from my wrists until I step into the chilly lake. The sudden change in temperature shocks me out of my head, and I look up before turning to see where I am, trying to reorient myself.

"The swing," I whisper. Pulling out the small notebook and pen I keep in my jacket pocket, I begin scribbling down short notes about what I remember seeing.

My therapist says it should help; she's been saying it for years. But Dr. Laura is wrong. It's never worked, and when I finally confessed that to her last week, she asked why. Stress immediately engulfed me, and I forgot who I was and why I was there. She'd heard about the episodes for years, but until then, she'd never experienced one before. Her shock would have thrown me, but the temporary amnesia made me afraid.

Transient Global Amnesia is what I was diagnosed with when I was five. It would have been sooner, but I wasn't talking until then because of my developmental and speech delays. I couldn't explain to anyone that I had forgotten who they were and where I was.

The more anxious I become, the more often the TGA happens, as well. Which is far more frequent than I would like.

I know Flora has been nagging my father for years to have me institutionalized, and for some reason, he hasn't done it

yet. I'm not sure if he feels guilt for my condition or if he thinks I'll grow out of it and finally be "normal". Dr. Laura says neither will happen.

Glancing down at my notebook, I begin to draw instead of taking notes. Before long, I've drawn the man and his son at their campsite. Smiling at the little picture, I wonder what they're doing now.

Chapter 2

Nolan

“**A**lrigh, buddy boy, I think that’s about enough marshmallows and chocolate for you tonight, or your mom’s going to have my head.” I’m not sure how much he actually ate of it, given the state his face and fingers are in.

“Awe, man.” The pout would work on me almost any other day, but I can’t get that girl out of my head. From the second she walked away, I wanted to go find her. But with Sawyer here, I couldn’t do that. Mainly because I promised him a boys-only weekend, not just a night.

Getting up to check on the water I boiled not long ago for cleaning Sawyer up before bed, I’m surprised to see the woman standing in the road. “Hey!” I call out. She jumps and drops something in her hands. “You okay?”

“Who’s that?” Sawyer asks as he walks up beside me.

“The girl from earlier.” Glancing down at him, I notice him looking at me funny. “She was with those women watching me chop the wood.”

“If you say so.”

“Wash your damn hands.” Gripping the sticky limbs, I shove them in the cooling water and pour soap all over them. Waiting until he begins scrubbing, I then walk over to her.

“What are you doing out here all alone? It’s past dark.” Pointing out the obvious, I look at her a little closer. She’s slightly frazzled, and her eyes are wide with confusion. Her mouth moves side to side as she contemplates my question.

Handing me the item she dropped, I see it’s a book. Or a journal, rather. On the front cover are a name, address, and phone number, along with a message.

If found, please call Flora Hastings and return.

“Is that you? Are you Flora?” I don’t like it. She doesn’t look like a Flora. Her face scrunches up with distaste.

“I have this, too.” Rolling up her sleeve, she shows me the inside of her wrist—a tattoo with another message.

My name is Bea. I have temporary memory loss. Please give me a safe space.

“Memory loss, huh?” She shrugs as her eyes flit around, trying to find something familiar, I bet. “Bea suits you better than Flora.” Her eyes jump back to mine, and I finally see in the dying sunlight that they’re a warm, golden, honey color and not the hazel that I thought. “Well, Bea, if a safe space is what you need, you’re welcome to join my nephew and me for a fire. We just put the marshmallows away, but I can pull them back out if you want.”

“Yay! More s’mores!” Sawyer cheers as I hear him racing over on the pebbled stones.

Her head tilts as she watches us for a minute. “What’s a s’more?” Sawyer’s jaw drops.

“Come on, Uncle Nolan. We have to make more now.” His pleading eyes gaze up at me.

“Only one more for you.” I point down at him, and he grins like I’ve given him the keys to Disney World. “Well, Bea, can we treat you to a sugar overload?”

Inhaling a shaky breath, her eyes flit around again like something might become familiar, before she finally nods. “S’mores it is.” The smile she gives me is damn near enough to bring me to my knees.

For another hour, we sit around the campfire eating the messy, gooey treat while playing games before I finally send a yawning Sawyer to bed. It takes three minutes before he’s snoring behind the zippered tent door a few feet away.

Studying Bea, I have a thousand questions for her, but I don’t think I’ll get any answers. Not until her memory returns.

“Do you want me to call this Flora person?” I nod at the journal in her hands. She hasn’t stopped fidgeting with it since she sat down.

I watch as she opens and closes the cover, reading the note on the inside and then shutting it again. “There’s a note”—she holds it up—“in here.” Her fingers trace the name on the front. “It says she’s not all that nice and makes things worse.”

I can tell she’s confused about what to do, so I offer up a solution. “I have an extra sleeping bag. You’d have to share a queen-sized air mattress with me, but you’d have your own covers. Maybe, after a good night’s sleep, things will clear up in the morning.”

Glancing back to the gravel road where I found her, she hesitates before nodding her head. I try not to examine too closely the relief I feel.

Bea

I wonder if I've felt the confusion before. Is it new, or did I hit my head? I didn't feel any pain and didn't find anything to indicate I'd hurt myself when Nolan took Sawyer to the washroom earlier. I hate the assumption that this happens often. Forgetting who I am and where I belong. The not knowing is more terrifying than anything.

"Want to show me what's in that book?" Nolan's curious voice is comforting, like a thick warm blanket on a cold winter day. Fidgeting with the pages, I finally hand it over to him.

I watch as he flips through, page after page, before pausing on the last one. "This is really good." He turns it around so I can see.

It looks to be him, chopping wood, with the boy smiling in a camping chair. "We've met?" I never would have guessed. They didn't say anything.

"Not really. I saw you earlier with three other women. I wanted to stop you, but Sawyer was ready to light the damn fire." He shakes his head with a grin on his face. "The kid is determined to get me in shit with his mom."

"Is she your sister?" Nolan and Sawyer have a hilarious relationship. It was fun to watch them interact tonight.

"No. Noelle is my best friend's wife, and Sawyer is her son. You'd never know he doesn't belong to Holden, however. They're thick as thieves." He sounds envious.

"Do you want children?" I don't know what gives me the guts to ask.

His head jerks up as he hands me back the book. His eyes bore into mine with something unsaid. “With the right girl, yeah, I think I do.”

There’s something more to that statement, but I’m already so addled that I don’t know what to make of it. I don’t know what to make of any of it. An owl hoots in the distance as the fire crackles, the embers slowly dying.

I feel Nolan’s eyes on me as I stare down into the almost non-existent fire, and a yawn overtakes me, cracking my jaw and making my eyes water. Exhaustion weighs heavy.

“Looks like it’s time to get you into bed too.” His voice is thick, heavy with underlying meaning, but his boyish grin comes off innocent.

Standing up, I watch as he moves to the tent, opening the front flap, and a lamp comes to life. It’s then I notice it has two rooms. I assume Sawyer is on one side while he—we—will be on the other.

“I dropped a shirt on the bed if you’d like to wear it. You can head in and get changed while I put this fire out and hit the head. I’ll be back in a few.”

Chewing on my lip, I nod and accept the offer. Nolan closes the zipper behind me, and I quickly fold up my sweater, shirt, bra, and skirt and place them on the ground next to the bed with my journal before slipping on the shirt that smells just like him. Spicy, masculine, woody. He invades my senses as I inhale the neck of the shirt. I wonder if he’ll allow me to keep it when I leave.

Registering the hissing from the fire, I quickly climb into the bed before the door opens again. I’m already shivering by the time I’ve got the zipper of the sleeping bag up. The flannel

inside the cocoon will hopefully warm me up sooner rather than later.

“You good?” Nolan whispers, careful not to wake Sawyer.

“Yup,” I squeak out, and he’s coming in before the full three letters are out of my mouth. I watch him move as he locks the thin barrier after closing it and remains bent down to strip off his clothes.

Too fascinated to turn away, I admire how his tattoos move with his body. The dark ink pops on his tanned flesh, rippling when his muscles flex. Down to a pair of boxer briefs, Nolan has no shame in showing off his body, and I can’t say I blame him one bit because he is a beautiful man.

I’m certain he catches me staring, but he doesn’t say a word as he turns off the lantern, and a few seconds later, he’s crawling onto the mattress with me. He’s brawny, so it’s no surprise that once he’s settled, the bed dips, and we’re as close as if we were lovers.

“Sorry,” I whisper, trying to drag myself closer to the edge and out of his space.

His body turns, and his powerful arm drapes over me, dragging me back into his body. “Stay right here,” he grunts as his hand buries itself under my side while his other arm slips under the pillow my head is on.

I stiffen for a while, but he ignores it as he buries his face into the back of my neck, inhaling deeply before I feel his body relax. It doesn’t take much longer before I follow suit and allow the safety he’s offering to put me to sleep until the sun begins to rise.

Chapter 3

Bea

Waking with a sudden jolt, I feel both dizzy and hungover. It's always like this after an episode. I've watched my sisters come home drunk often enough, forgetting what happened the next morning that I know this is what it's like. Except I always remember.

"You're tense." The rumbled voice under the side of my face startles me. Nolan doesn't let me pull away, though. Instead, he holds me tighter. "You remember." It's fairly obvious.

"Yes," I whisper, not wanting to awaken Sawyer.

"Is it always a bit like falling out of an airplane when you do?" It takes me a moment to figure out his meaning, but when I do, I realize he's right. The landing is always rough despite having a parachute to catch me.

"Always." And I hate it every single time.

"Does it happen often?"

"Often enough."

He shifts beneath me, leaning up on an elbow to stare down at me. "Tell me about it."

"What do you mean?" But I know. Nolan is intelligent and observant.

“What triggers it?” Brushing my messy hair away from my face, he traces my jaw with a finger, lulling me into a sense of security.

“A lot of things.” I shrug, but I can tell that won’t satisfy him. “Stress, major changes, trauma.”

“What kind of trauma?” I shrug again because I don’t really want to get into that. “Bea,” he prompts, but there’s a demand in his tone.

Blowing out a breath, I accept it’s a losing battle. “I have two sisters and a stepmother. They aren’t the kindest people in the world, but I’m sure they mean well.”

“Like tying your wrists and dragging you around a campground like you’re a dog?” The challenge in his tone begs me to argue with him, but I won’t. Because it’s true. What’s there to argue about?

“When I was a little girl, I’d get so scared when these episodes occurred. I’d cry for days, even after recalling everything. When I started drawing, it would help. I keep notebooks with me all the time now.” I glance up to see his eyes still reflect his anger. “I can leave myself little notes. Clues about who I am. But drawing is what calms me. I’m afraid that when he sends me away, I won’t have the same access to the things I have now.”

“Sends you away?” I freeze; I hadn’t realized I said that out loud.

Clearing my throat, I roll to my back and gaze up at the roof of the tent. The shadows of the trees above sway with the light breeze. Already, the sun is warm and beating down on us.

“My stepmother wants my father to institutionalize me. Send me to a home for the mentally disabled.” Saying it out

loud hurts more than when I overhear them talking about it.

“Jesus,” Nolan growls.

“She’s tired of taking care of me,” I explain. I don’t blame her, either. I just wish I wasn’t such a burden.

“She’s your fucking family.” The conviction in his tone warms me.

“Do you have a big family?” His eyes narrow at my subject change, but I need to move on. Being with him and Sawyer has been an oasis for me, and I know it’ll come to an abrupt halt sooner or later.

His jaw ticks before he answers. “Yes. I have a younger brother and sister. Damien is out in L.A. with our cousin Santo, and Lake still lives at home.” I can see something about that troubles him but don’t push for more. “I have a dozen or so cousins, too. We’re all close. They aren’t technically my cousins, we aren’t related by blood, but our parents are close, and we all grew up together. We’re family.”

“That must be nice.” I don’t believe I have any other family.

“Sure. When they aren’t sticking their noses in my business. But I can’t complain because I’ve got Sawyer to hang with now. And he’s infinitely more fun to chill with than my day job.”

Nolan has a way of lightening a situation, and I appreciate that about him, but I see past his cavalier attitude to the pain lurking under the surface. He has secrets he’s hiding from the world, also.

“What about you? Any other family you actually like?” I give a quick shake of my head. “Friends?”

When I scoff, he frowns, and his lips thin. “As if someone wants to befriend a freak like me.”

“Don’t do that.” He seems bothered by the truth.

“What? Say it like it is? What’s the point in hiding my reality? I haven’t had a friend since kindergarten, and even that didn’t last long.” It hurts to admit that out loud. “Nobody wants to be around a girl who loses her memory at the drop of a hat.”

“I do.” His words stun me into silence. Biting my lip, I don’t know what to say, so I remain silent. He doesn’t mean that. He can’t. He won’t after he witnesses it happen a few times. It gets old pretty fast, and he’ll be no different than anyone else in my life.

Leave as soon as it works in his favor.

Nolan

She doesn’t see it, the way her emotions play across her face. She can’t hide anything she’s thinking from me. Bea is an anomaly, and I’m going to have a fucking blast figuring her out. The only problem standing in the way is her. Because she doesn’t think she’s good enough, and that’s a fucking lie.

Cupping her cheek, I turn her face so she’s forced to look at me. “Don’t discount what I say on the presumption that I’m like everyone else. I don’t follow the pack, I fucking lead it.”

Her striking honey eyes stare up at me in wonder and amazement, and I can’t fucking help it. I lean down to kiss her, and suddenly, I’m lost. Everything around us melts away, and

all I want to do is climb between her legs and settle myself there for days, months, years to come.

I never fucking believed Holden when he said he instinctively knew Noelle was his. I thought it was bullshit. But her taste, her sweet little puffs of breath, the way her body quakes as I lean over her, it's addicting. I want more.

I want to overwhelm her until she forgets her past.

All the hardship. The agony. The terror she must feel when she looks up with no memory. I want to vanquish it all so all she knows is me.

And I'm going to.

Bea doesn't realize it yet, but the way her fingers run through my hair, playing with the ends as her eyes close and she accepts my tongue into her mouth, is the beginning of the end. This girl *will* belong to me. And there isn't a single person in the world who will stop me. So help me god, if they try to, I'll end them as swiftly as I did the Russians in Maryland.

"Wow," she murmurs as I draw back from her lips, licking across the delicate flesh as we part. "I've never been kissed before." I don't think she meant to verbalize that from the widening of her eyes and the red-hued tint to her cheeks.

"Get used to it," I tell her, trying to tamp down my raging dick as she stares at me all innocently. I want to fuck her. Right here, right now. I want to pop that fucking cherry and lay my claim on her, but I can't. Not yet. And not because Sawyer is one layer of fabric away, either.

I need her to want to be with me. I need her squirming and begging me to take her last shred of virtue before I can tear my way through it. The very last thing I want to do is treat her the

way her family does, by taking her choices away. I just need to figure out how to get her to make the choices I want for her.

Reaching over, I grab for her book when my eye catches that tattoo again. Gripping her wrist in one hand, I glance at her. “Why did you get this?” I have a feeling I already know, but I need her to confirm it for me.

She lifts her shoulder in indifference.

“Bea.” My voice holds a warning. I need to know.

“I just wanted options.” Her gaze slides to her notebook in my hand.

There’s so much she isn’t fucking telling me.

She has no reason to trust you.

Recognizing the truth in that doesn’t make it less infuriating. Pulling the pen from the pocket of the book, I write my name and number on the inside jacket pocket, with the demand that I’m called before anyone else. If she needs rescuing, it’s for damn sure going to be me coming to her aid.

“From now on, you call me. For anything. Any time. Day or night.” I realize my words come out more aggressive than necessary, but I need her to understand that I’m her first call from now on.

I’m her only call as far as I’m concerned. But Bea needs to learn that on her own.

“You don’t want this burden, Nolan. No one does.” Grinding my teeth, I hate how sad she sounds.

As I lift her chin with my finger, I hear Sawyer beginning to wake up. “You’re not a burden. Nothing about you is, and if I have my way, I’ll be proving it to you real fucking soon.”

Chapter 4

Nolan

After warming up one of the egg scramblers Noelle made for us over the fire, I keep an eye on Bea to make sure she's eating. She's too skinny, too pale. Too unhealthy in my eyes. I'm unsure if it's just how she's built, due to her condition, or something even worse.

"You're going to get lines," she mumbles into her cup of hot chocolate as she takes a sip.

"What?" My frown deepens.

Reaching over, her finger traces the indentations between my eyes and into my forehead. "If you keep frowning and glaring the way you do, those lines are going to be permanent."

Her touch is feather-light, but I'm quickly addicted and want more, so I crinkle my forehead deeper. She gives me a matching look, so I mimic her actions. "I could say the same for you."

Dropping her hand, her head turns as she watches Sawyer finish his food. It doesn't require a miracle to guess what she's thinking. It's written all over her face.

"You want kids." I'll give her a dozen.

“Me?” Her feigned ignorance is a farce, and I wish she wouldn’t try it with me. “No. I mean...I can’t.”

“Why not?” Turning my body to face her fully, I realize I’m not going to like what she has to say.

“I don’t want to be the cause of them being treated like I was... am...because I pass on one of my disabilities.” The words are spoken with a coldness that feels rehearsed.

“What disabilities?” I really need to learn more about her. About her memory loss and why it happens, besides the triggers.

Her shoulder lifts, and before she can answer, Sawyer declares he’s done eating and wants to explore the campground some more. “I think there’s a park,” Bea suggests, smiling forlornly at him.

“Yes!” He pumps his fist. “Can we go, Uncle Nolan?” I nod, and he’s on his feet, swapping out his slides for his runners. “Let’s go!”

“I should probably go back to our lake house. My family is likely worried.” She doesn’t sound like she believes that, and frankly, neither do I. If they were concerned about where she was, they’d have come looking for her by now.

I see her reluctance to return home, so I offer an alternative. “How about we stop there on the way to the park? You can let them know you’re safe *and* spend more time with us.” If I have my way, I’ll be convincing this deadbeat father of hers that she’s coming home with us, and I’ll take care of her from now on.

“I don’t want to impose on your weekend.” Standing up, I set our dishes in the cooler and lock it before putting it in the back of my pickup.

Reaching out a hand for her, I tug her to her feet. “You’re not imposing; we’re inviting you. We want to spend more time with you, Bea.” That seems to perplex her.

Bea

They want to spend time with me?

Nobody has ever said that to me before. I’ve never had anyone want to be around me after they learn of my condition and that it’s not a one-off. I’ve never been in the company of a man who wasn’t someone else’s friend, let alone one who seemed to like me.

And kissed me.

My body still buzzes from the way he took my mouth. The way he swept his tongue past my lips and licked across every crevice he could while my hands ventured out and touched him back. I could tell he was restraining himself. I don’t know how I knew, but I did, and I didn’t want him to.

“Don’t run too far!” Nolan yells out at Sawyer as the boy runs along the road’s edge, searching the grass for snakes. “Tell me about the memory loss.” I’m shocked when he says this and grasps my hand, interlacing our fingers.

“Not a lot to tell. It’s called Transient Global Amnesia, or TGA for short. I was diagnosed when I was five.” I don’t want him to ask more questions, but I know he’s going to.

“What causes it?”

“It’s different for a lot of people.”

“And for you...” I wish he would drop it. I wish I could ask him to, but I realize his curiosity isn’t born out of his desire to use it against me. It’s genuine.

Glancing at him through my lowered lashes, I ask instead, “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Wouldn’t ask otherwise.”

Blowing out a breath, I search for calm. I’m always torn between anger and sadness when discussing the woman who gave me life. “My mother was an addict; being pregnant didn’t stop her, and I’m the one who suffered the consequences.” Glancing around, I see the lake house in the distance, and I become sad that our time is coming to an end. Even though Nolan wants to spend more time with me, I won’t be allowed to.

“More than the TGA?” I feel his eyes on me, penetrating, observant, curious.

“I didn’t speak until I was almost five. It’s why it took so long to figure out I had it. I had these terrible episodes, and I would become violent, petrified of everyone around me, and helpless to stop it. I couldn’t communicate that I had no idea who I was, let alone how to tell them I didn’t recognize them, and so I was heavily medicated a lot as a child, even after the diagnosis. Because how do you tell a child with no memory about who they are, where they’re supposed to be, and that the people they don’t know are their family? It was easier to drug me and wait for me to come out of it than deal with the fallout every time.” Telling someone for the first time what happened, even after my diagnosis, feels good. I don’t feel so crazy.

“They drugged you. For how long?” He’s aghast. Sawyer stops in the grass to poke at something before kicking his foot and moving on.

Nolan won't be happy with this response. "Until I was about twelve."

His fingers clench on mine, and I know without looking that he's pissed off.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" That's pretty much how I feel about it too. "That's criminal."

I stare at him because it doesn't matter what it is. It's my life, and I don't get a say in it, given I'm not of sound mind and body. At least, that's how it was explained to me years ago. I'm reliant and dependent on my father and stepmother, and there's nothing anyone can do for me.

Stopping, I get yanked back when Nolan pulls on my arm. "Is there no cure?" Flush to his body, he dives a hand into my messy hair, cupping the back of my head.

"You're not going to like it." Nolan cups the side of my neck with his other hand, and I see Sawyer from the corner of my eye as he's stopped, watching us. This man leans down, pressing our heads together, eyes closed, and nods his assurance. "The stress, the...abuse"—his eyes fly open at the word, and in them, I catch flaming rage. "If it stopped, the TGA might resolve, or at least occur less frequently, and I might be able to have an actual life."

"Abuse." He grits out the word with so much menace that I try to step back, but he won't let me. "Who the fuck is hurting you?"

"Bean Plant Daley! Where the hell have you been?" my stepmother's grating voice interrupts before I can answer him. I watch as his eyes widen at the use of my full name.

"You're named after a vegetable?" Sawyer asks and gazes up at me inquisitively. I respond with an uneasy smile as I nod.

“Well? Are you going to answer me or be a brat and ignore me like usual?” Her shrill voice has me clenching my jaw.

“I’m sorry, I had an episode, and Nolan was kind enough to let me stay with him and his nephew last night.” I already know what’s headed my way as my sisters come outside.

Their eyes immediately take in the way Nolan is holding me, how close we are, and their claws extend with vengeance. “Would you look at that? Seems little miss Bean isn’t as innocent as we thought.” Amari laughs.

“I bet she faked it so she could warm his bed.” Elsa glares at me. She’s angry because she wanted that honor.

“Are you going to introduce your conquest?” Flora finally asks, and I feel my cheeks ignite, a mix of embarrassment and anger from their assumptions.

“I didn’t fake anything, I swear,” I whisper to Nolan as I meet his gaze. “I wouldn’t even think to do that.”

“I know,” he growls. His jaw locks, and his eye ticks at the corner. The anger emanating from him is powerful as he brings his lips down to kiss me lightly, sliding his mouth along mine as he turns my head for deeper access. I swallow my gasp and block out the outrage from the three women on the porch of the house looking down on us.

“Gross,” Sawyer grumbles from beside us as I hear him shifting his feet in the gravel.

“That’s quite enough!” Flora yells. Nolan ignores her.

His arms wrap tighter around my body, holding me as close as he can before he draws back just a fraction and mutters against my lips, “It’ll be enough when I’m buried inside you for so long that we won’t know where I end and you begin.”

Flushing at his description, I struggle for the words to respond. Chewing on the inside of my cheek, Nolan traces my jaw with a finger before pulling my lip out of my mouth and sliding it along my tongue, groaning when my lips close around it.

“What is going on out here?” Hearing my father’s voice, I jump and accidentally bite Nolan’s fingers. He grunts but doesn’t remove it.

“Not a fucking word,” he hisses when I’m about to apologize. His impressive erection pressing into my belly as he regains control of himself keeps my mind busy.

“Morris, nice to see you again.” It’s my turn to be surprised as Nolan stares up at my visibly shocked parent.

“You know him?” I ask. He nods his head, a coldness overtaking his body.

Nolan

I never would have fucking guessed.

Morris fucking Hastings has a third daughter. I had no idea. I doubt anyone in the family did. We’ve been doing business with this man for years. I’ve never met the rest of his family, so I wouldn’t know who they are, but learning he has a third daughter, Bea, and that he treats her so disposably really pisses me off.

“Nolan.” I raise a brow at his use of my first name. “Mr. Sutton.” Better. We’re not friendly enough for him to be so casual with me. The fact that my father and Uncle Atticus hate

him will mean we never are. “Wh-what, uh, what are you doing here?”

“You know this man?” his wife hisses in his ear.

“Oh, he more than knows me,” I grunt. I’ve been lending money to Morris for the last three years. He’s made me a pretty penny off of interest, too.

“Bea is safe.” I look at him before sliding a glare at his wife. “She’ll be spending the rest of the weekend with us.” I leave no room for argument.

The wife tries, nonetheless. “Now, wait a minute. Just because she slutted—”

“Be wise in your next choice of words, Mrs. Hastings,” I warn, keeping the threat subtle.

“Nolan?” Bea pulls on my shirt, and I see the stress lining her face as she pales. It’s about to happen again.

Sliding a hand around her neck, I do the only thing I can think of to prevent her from losing it and slant my mouth over her lips. I dive in, sweeping my tongue across hers, licking the delicate flesh inside her cheek, wishing it were between her legs.

She tastes of her morning hot chocolate and something else. Something addicting that I want more of. Infinitely more of.

What started as a way to distract her from her family has quickly evolved. Desire thrashes through my veins with the elegance of a steam engine, and as I jerk her closer, disregarding everyone and everything around us, her body melts into mine. That’s when I know she’s with me, even though her mind is trying to run away on her. Protect her from

a family that, frankly, doesn't deserve to spend a second more in her presence.

Sawyer's hand, pulling on mine at her waist, drags me back to a reality I'd rather forget if only I could remain lost in Bea's sweet taste.

"Yeah, kid?" I respond, opening my eyes. Bea's cheeks are flushed, and her lips are red and swollen, but it's her eyes that capture me. Bright as the morning sky and clear as she smiles up at me, forgetting the people around her and the reason she was about to disappear.

"Can we go to the park now? I'm bored." Biting back a grin at Sawyer's question, Bea presses her head into my chest against my thundering heart.

"Bea, run inside and pack what you need. We'll be waiting right here." She's biting her lip as she looks up at me but, eventually, agrees and does as I ask.

"How do you know my daughter?" Morris asks, avoiding the glare from the woman at his side.

Cocking my head, I study the man. He's not nearly as in control of his life as he presents to the world around him. He's at the mercy of this tyrannical bitch next to him.

"I didn't until last night when I found her wandering." I don't offer more.

"Why didn't you call us?" the stepmother snaps, obviously having no idea who I am. "My number is in the front of her book." Morris mutters something in her ear that has her face reddening as the daughters attempt to slink inside.

"Whatever you're planning, ladies, I advise against it. Bea is under my protection now," I warn, and it'll be the only one they receive.

“What are you going to do, hit me?” the cocky one who insinuated Bea was faking her illness last night smarts.

“Test me and find out.” I raise a brow in challenge, and I see she wants to, but Morris shakes his head at her.

Everyone waits quietly and patiently now until Bea returns from the house with a small bag in her hands and a blanket. “I meant everything,” I tell her as she descends the steps and I reach for her belongings.

“This is everything.” Her shameful words only piss me off further.

“Morris, come see me this week. The sooner, the better.” He swallows before acknowledging me. From the looks on the faces of the women surrounding him, they’ve never seen him defer to someone before. I bet he’s about to have an enjoyable weekend of criticism and questions.

Chapter 5

Bea

Sitting on the swing as Nolan and Sawyer search through the weeds near the water on the hunt for frogs, I observe them. I've never had anyone stand up for me before the way that Nolan did, so effortlessly and selflessly. It's almost so foreign that I wonder if I only imagined it.

Maybe I'm dreaming?

If I am, I don't ever want to wake up.

Nolan has a way of making me feel normal. Like I'm not broken. When he kissed me in front of everyone, I felt the panic growing, the anxiety of being a burden, and I knew without a doubt that another episode was about to occur.

Usually, I blink, and it's happened. It's not often I get a heads-up, but today, I did.

And his kiss stopped it cold.

Nolan did what no doctor, pill, or exercise ever has.

"So..." His voice draws me out of my thoughts as he approaches. Sawyer is playing in the sand with some shovels and buckets now. "You going to explain the name?"

Pushing me gently from behind, the chains of the swing squeak. "A parting gift from my birth mom."

“Interesting choice.” There’s amusement in his tone.

“I guess.” I drop my head a bit as I close my eyes, absorbing the faint breeze brushing across my skin. “Flora didn’t want me to have Dad’s last name, so I got to keep hers.”

“But why Bean?”

I’ve asked myself that a million times.

“I think it was a parting shot at Flora. Because of her name.” He makes a humming noise at that, but I don’t ask what he’s thinking. I’m not entirely sure I want to know.

“You made it stop,” I tell him after a few minutes, using my feet in the dirt to stop the swinging so I can stand and face him. “When you initially kissed me in front of everyone...I felt it coming on. There was a buzzing in my brain, and my eyes were cloudy, but then you kissed me again, and I didn’t forget.”

“That so?” I can read his face, so I confirm. Gripping the front of my shirt, he drags me closer. “Guess I’ll have to do that a hell of a lot more, then.”

His lips drop on mine, and I’m lost in his atmosphere. Holding on to Nolan, I have no idea what I’m doing. I’d never been kissed until I met him, and I’m learning as I go. Like flicking my tongue against his. I enjoy that, and from the growl rumbling from his chest and the way he wraps his free hand around my back to hold me closer, I think he does too.

My heart pounds inside my chest, beating almost painfully against my ribcage as my ears ring, and I feel the blood flowing through my veins, pumping so hard I ache all over.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach as I register his hard length pressing into me. Rubbing my thighs together, I try to squelch a hunger I’ve never felt before. It’s foreign and

delicious, and I think I want more of it. I want to know where it leads.

“You’re going to get me into so much shit,” Nolan mutters against my lips. He doesn’t sound worried about that, though.

“Why?” I don’t understand how I could.

His head shakes, and an amused grin crosses his face as his eyes pierce through me. “Because I want to take you home. I want to keep you. And I for damn sure never want any of those vipers near you again.”

I’m not entirely certain how to take his statement, so I don’t say anything. Nolan is unlike anyone I’ve ever known before. He’s intense but funny, honest but kind—to me, anyway— and he looks at me with a secret only he knows the answers to. And when he kisses me, I forget everything. All the pain of my past, the questionable things I endure. He makes me think I deserve more.

But I don’t.

I never will.

It’s been drummed into me for as long as I can remember that I’m worthless. A burden. Unwanted. An afternoon of frivolity isn’t going to change my perception on how my life is. I wish it could, but I know it won’t.

“Hey.” He snaps his fingers in front of my face, a frown marring his stoic features. “Where’d you go just now?”

“Just wondering what your life is like away from here,” I lie, hoping I have a curious expression on my face and not the doubt I feel.

His eyes narrow as he assesses my response, clearly not believing me but not calling me on it either. “Boring,” he

finally answers, and I get the feeling it's anything but that.

"Hey, Uncle Nolan, can we go make burgers now?" Sawyer interrupts, and we're both dragged back to reality.

"Yeah, kid." Nolan ruffles the dark mop of hair on the boy's head. "Grub it is, but you're cooking." The dumbfounded look on Sawyer's face makes me laugh. It's a mix of horror and excitement.

"I think Mom might be mad about that."

Nolan nods his head as he reaches back for my hand, entwining our fingers and walking us all back. "You're probably right about that. She'd likely filet my balls into minced meat."

"I dunno what that means, but it doesn't sound good," Sawyer mutters as he runs ahead, leaving us to walk in silence.

It's not uncomfortable, but there's a lot hanging in the air between us, and I'm the clueless one who doesn't understand what any of it means.

Per usual.

Nolan

"You sure about this, Nol?" Holden's voice on the other end of this call isn't as hesitant as his question.

"Positive." I didn't believe it was possible. Not in my life. But the more time I spend with Bea, the more I realize I can't live without her.

I was never a sucker for the whole insta-love bullshit everyone seemed to be harping on, but the second I saw her, I

knew she would change my life. And the more I've gotten to know her, the more certain I am.

"If you get caught, you know you're going to prison, right? Hell, so will I. Noelle will kill us both." Hold grumbles, but I hear him typing away, and I can only imagine him in the dark of the living room, his pregnant wife upstairs in bed asleep as he rushes through what he needs so he can get back to her.

I want that.

I didn't realize I did until I spent more and more time at their house these past few months. Usually, to hang out and game with Sawyer. The kid's a genius in *Call of Duty*.

Doesn't mean I didn't watch my best friend and his wife when they weren't looking. I could never identify *why* until this weekend.

Envy.

Jealousy.

Desire to replicate their life for myself.

I'm not a good man, never tried to be. I've killed, stolen, sold drugs, and until a year ago, I ran a brothel; now, it's turned into a gentleman's club. I have no illusions that any woman I call my own will be a target of anyone who dislikes me.

Bea is worth the risk, though, because I know there is nothing I won't do to keep her safe and happy. If that means building a fortress to keep her hidden from the world, I'll do it happily with my bare fucking hands.

"This is going to take a while, man. I'll have it ready for you when you get here in the morning." The pregnant pause is

telling before he finally says, “It’d go faster if we roped in Daniel.”

“No.” Nobody else needs to know more about her than I do, let alone exactly what’s wrong with her. No one else needs to break the law the way I’m asking Holden to.

Hacking into her medical records because I don’t trust her family to be telling the truth is one thing, but including more people than necessary is too risky.

“Alright, but I’d like it on record that he is better at this than I ever will be.”

“Noted. We’ll see you tomorrow.” Hanging up, I slip the phone back in my pocket as I stare up at the house Bea’s family is staying in for the summer, as the moonlight reflects off the lake behind it.

I left Bea and Sawyer sleeping to make this call to Holden. It’s past midnight, and I know I didn’t wake him up because he has a thing about watching Noelle in slumber.

I want to storm in there and demand answers to questions I haven’t asked Bea yet, but I know I won’t get them. That fucking wicked stepmother of hers is one of those women who hold appearances above all. After our interactions there yesterday, I know they won’t let her go without a fight.

And with Bea’s condition, I’m willing to bet that if they have plans to disgorge her from their care, it won’t be to a man who wants to claim her but to a facility that will dope her up and then forget about her.

I won’t allow that to happen.

Bea doesn’t know it yet, but I have every intention of bringing her home with us tomorrow. I’m laying my claim on her and never letting her go.

She's as innocent as the day is long, and by the end of it, I fully intend to be buried so deep inside her that we're one. I'd kill to knock her up, but until I get her in to see doctors independent from her family, I don't want to make that choice for her. I want her to want it too. I fucking *need* her to want it because the idea of always having to wear a condom when I'm inside her is bullshit.

I want her walls rippling around my cock as she comes. I want my life force coating and warming her from the inside out—every damn time.

Christ, she's got me inside out already, and I haven't even possessed her yet.

Walking back to our tent site, my phone vibrates, and I know whom it is without looking.

Holden: I'm bringing Danny-boy in on this.

Nolan: Why?

I can only imagine what he's found now.

Holden: They have her scheduled to be sterilized by end of summer.

What the fuck!

Nolan: Are you fucking serious?

Holden: Wouldn't lie about this.

Nolan: Find everything you can to take them down. I want them bankrupt and desolate by the end of the week.

I can't fucking believe this. I knew shit was bad, but I didn't have a fucking clue *how* bad.

Holden: FYI she's 19 if you didn't know. Ripe for the picking 😊

Nolan: Shut the fuck up.

Holden: Hey! I'm just saying, a good way to get a woman to give you a shot is to knock her up. Worked on Noelle.

Shaking my head, I can't fucking believe him. Noelle was always every bit as in love with him as he was with her; she was just smart enough to make the asshole work for it.

But his idea has merit. And the more I allow the thought to filter through my mind, the more inclined I am for it to happen. Not just to keep her safe or to claim her, but because Bea would look fucking stunning round with my child, and no matter the argument I know she will make because of her condition, I believe she'll be an amazing mom.

I just need to entice her to come home with me.

Chapter 6

Nolan

I see how Bea's fingers fidget in her lap, contrary to her stoic demeanor. Staring straight ahead, expressionless, her body eerily still. If not for those fingers, I wouldn't pick up on how nervous she is.

What I don't understand is what's got her so uneasy. We had a good morning; she and Sawyer made breakfast over the fire while I packed up our supplies. We didn't stop at the cabin her family is renting. She didn't ask to, and I didn't offer. I didn't want to give her a choice to go back to them. With enough pressure, she might have, and that just wouldn't do.

I realize it makes me selfish and probably manipulative, but I need her—not them. I don't fucking know what they want with her, but it's not anything good. Me, though, I want to give her the world. I want to see her smile, to laugh with her. To hear her moaning my name while I'm balls deep in her tight cunt. I crave her. Obsessively.

Imagining a day without her is untenable. Despite the fact we barely know each other, my soul calls to her, and something inside of her must resonate with it because she hasn't asked or shown any indication that she wishes to leave my side.

Sawyer has been abnormally quiet, as well, staring out the window from his seat in the back. The kid is crazy intuitive, and it has a lot to do with how he grew up. He recognizes another's anxiety as if it were his own.

“Hey, kid, why don't you tell Bea about the treehouse.” The suggestion has him grinning from ear to ear. He and Noelle were entirely in the dark when Holden and I began working on that beast over the end of last summer, almost as soon as they moved in with my friend.

“It's almost the size of my room!” he begins, leaning forward to see more of Bea's face as she turns slightly to listen to him. “It has a skylight in it, too. There's a couch and game table. And Dad says he's going to put in a TV and gaming console as soon as he can convince Mom.” He continues to chatter on, and his excitement over the project begins to relax Bea.

He engages her, and she asks all kinds of questions; even makes a couple of suggestions that have Sawyer bouncing in his seat. The idea of a play area for his soon-to-be brother or sister is his favorite. The moat is a close second.

Before long, we pull into their driveway, and I notice Holden and Noelle sitting in the swing on the front porch.

“Mom!” Sawyer jumps out of the vehicle as soon as I shut the engine off. “Bea had the best idea for the baby!” The door slams and I see her tension reappear.

“Come on, let me introduce you.” Noelle is listening raptly as Sawyer goes on and on about what they were talking about. Knowing Bea has to go at her own pace, I get out and retrieve the kid's stuff from the back for Holden as she works up the courage to meet my family.

“She okay in there?” Holden asks as I drop the tailgate.

“Yeah,” I respond, my eyes not leaving the back of her head. “Just needs a minute.”

Slamming the truck bed door shut after gathering everything, I help him bring Sawyer’s bag, tent, and the cooler Noelle sent with us up to the porch. “Sounds like he had a blast.” Noelle smiles up at me, her eyes wandering back to Bea sitting in my truck, raising an eyebrow in question.

“Bud, why don’t you take this stuff inside? Put your dirty clothes in the laundry room,” Holden tells him, and the kid rushes off to do as he’s asked.

“Holden didn’t say much about your...friend.” Noelle’s inquisition is curious rather than critical.

“Don’t know much.”

“Enough for *him* to be up half the night digging into her and her family for you.” Her brows raise in challenge. She doesn’t say it to be mean, but I hear the concern in her tone.

“Things haven’t been easy for her.” Turning when I hear the truck door open, I stride towards her with a smile on my face.

“I’m sorry,” Bea whispers as I reach for her hand.

I give her a lop-sided look. “Why?”

“Cause I’m broken. I can’t do anything normally.” Her self-deprecation has me grinding my molars. I’d like to smack every member of her family around a few times for what they’ve done to her.

Cupping her cheek with my free hand, I lean my head against hers. “You don’t ever have to be sorry about a fucking thing, especially when trying to break out of the habits they

forced on you.” Pressing my lips to hers, I linger for a minute before pulling away. “Noelle and Holden are good people. You can count on them for anything.” I try to implore her how important it is for her to understand that, but back off when she can only stare up at them.

“Hi, Bea, I’m Noelle. Sawyer has had quite a bit to say about you.” Noelle welcomes her with a smile as she pats the seat next to her on the swing.

“Thank you. He talked about you both quite a bit this weekend.” She’s skittish as she sits, gripping the chain holding the swing to the porch.

“He’s a good kid,” Holden says, sounding cranky as always. Bea doesn’t look up at him as she nods her head. “Let’s go grab the ladies some sweet tea, Nol.”

Following behind my best friend, I know he’s got something to tell me. And from the rigid set of his shoulders, I’m not going to like it.

Leaving the women on the porch, we pass Sawyer as he’s unloading his stuff before stopping in the kitchen, where Holden flips a laptop around to show me the screen.

“Well, this is going to be fucking fun,” I grunt, staring at the arrest warrant out for me.

“It’s on hold for the moment because of a friend, but you have forty-eight hours max to do whatever you need to for that girl before the police are knocking down your door.”

Noelle was really nice. She didn't outright say she knew about my TGA, but I got the feeling she did because she kept trying to excuse her husband's grumpy and stressful demeanor. I was grateful for that because Holden is an intimidating man. More so than Nolan.

I also got a chance to see Sawyer's treehouse before we left, and he was right, it is very impressive. Something I would have loved as a child.

Nolan doesn't live far from his friends' home, so when we arrive, I'm surprised to find a farmhouse in similar fashion to Noelle and Holden's—a wrap-around porch, welcoming Adirondack chairs, and flowerpots hanging along the roof.

“Those are my sister Lake's touch. She loves to garden and has insisted I need them.” His voice is warm as he speaks of her, but I sense an underlying worry.

“She was right.” They make the property appear less standoffish.

“She'll be glad to hear you say that.” His grin doesn't quite reach his eyes as he helps me down from his truck. Reaching in the back, he grabs my bag. “I'll give you a quick tour before I unload this crap.” He thumbs towards the camping gear in his truck.

“I could help.” I'm not nearly as useless as my family implies.

“It's just a couple of things,” he mumbles as we climb the steps to the front entrance. I watch as he unlocks his door with a thumbprint scanner rather than a key. “New technology I'm trying out.”

“I've never seen anything like it.” It must be quite recent because my father likes to play with gadgets like this, so I'm

surprised he doesn't know about it.

Nolan plays nonchalant. "I know the owner of the company. He upgraded my security system with it, and I just report back any flaws or issues I find." Closing the door with his foot, he pulls me along through to the family room. "It's more man cave than home right now."

The oversized brown leather sectional looks inviting with its plush cushions and blanket over the back. The mammoth TV with gaming consoles on one wall is what gives it the bachelor look.

"Kitchen is through here." He points behind us. Sliding doors lead out to an impressive deck, and the open area is mostly bare. "Bathroom is here, but you'll like the one in our room better."

I stop dead in my tracks.

Our room.

I don't know why that's just hitting me. I understood this was what he wanted, right? On some subconscious level, I had to have known we would be sharing a room.

Sharing a bed.

But for some reason, it didn't penetrate before. I was so caught up in the excitement of someone seeing me for me that I forgot he was a man, with manly needs.

And for whatever reason, Nolan is attracted to me.

I can't fathom why. I'm a nobody. I'm nothing more than a burden on everyone around me, but with him...with Nolan, I'd forgotten all of that.

Until now.

Until being struck with the reality of my situation.

“Bea?” My eyes slowly rise to catch him staring at me.
“Where’d you go?”

How do I answer without sounding like a basket case? Most days, I feel twice my age because of all that I’ve lived through, but then I’m struck with this new reality, and I’m reminded of my inexperience in life, and I have no idea how to react. I don’t know what he wants me to say, and that’s the worst of it.

“Pretty girl?” Nolan pulls me into his body, dropping my bag at our feet and tilting my chin up, his mouth hovering over mine. “Whatever is going through that pretty head of yours, spit it out.”

Licking my lips, I try to put to words my crazy thoughts. “People don’t treat me like you do.” His eyes narrow. “I’m a disease to them.” I’m saying this all wrong, but I’m not used to speaking about this with anyone outside my family. “Sometimes, I feel like I’ve lived an entire existence because of all I’ve gone through, and then other times, like now, I’m so far out of my element that I don’t know what to do. What to say. I don’t have the experiences you do.”

With one hand still on my chin, he uses the other to brush through my dirty hair. I’m just now realizing I haven’t showered all weekend and feel gross. “This is new for me, too.” He finally whispers a secret I believe I’m the only one who knows.

“It is?” His eyes blaze with something dark and uncontrollable as he nods slowly. My heart begins to pound against my chest as his mouth lowers to mine, closing the gap between us.

Our bodies are just a whisper apart as he captures my lips, licking across the seam so I open for him. My tongue peeks out to play with his, and the uninhibited groan that erupts from his chest shivers through my body.

My hands fist at my sides. I don't know where to touch him, how to touch him. His hands remain on my chin and hair, and as his tongue slips into my open mouth, our lips seal together, and he caresses me softly with its tip.

So soft it tickles.

So soft, I can imagine it in other places.

So soft that he leaves me wanting much, much more.

When he pulls back, a whine escapes me. I don't want to stop, but I don't know how to ask for more. "I have to tell you something," he whispers, his mouth moving across my jaw to my ear. His breath warm like a brush from his hands.

"Okay," I breathe out as he finally steps into my body, melding us together. Leaving no room for guessing about how he feels as I feel his rigid length poking into my belly.

I love that he's so much bigger than me. I feel safe when I'm with him. Cherished when he holds me as he is now.

Little pecks of his mouth sweep across my neck and jaw before landing back on my lips. "From the second I saw you, I knew you were mine." I gasp at his words; they're very proprietary. "The first time I kissed you, I had one thought and one thought alone."

His hands move down to the backs of my thighs, and he picks me up, spinning me so my back hits the wall. "What thought?" I pant as he rubs his length against my core, sending fire through my bloodstream.

Sucking my bottom lip into his mouth, a strangled moan glides up my throat, and my ears ring with the need he's building inside me. "To breed you."

A nervous laugh escapes me. "Like a dog?"

"Like you're mine. Like if I knock you up, you're tied to me for life, and nothing or nobody can ever take you away from me. Like a claiming of the ultimate prize."

"You're crazy," I mutter, unable to process his words. "We don't know each other well enough for that." But inside, a thrill races along my spine at what he says. About how it makes me feel wanted.

Nolan wants me tied to him in the most incontrovertible way possible. He wants there to be no room for argument over the fact that he'll forever be in my life.

Even after he tires of me.

Because eventually, he will.

"Whatever you're thinking, fucking stop. You're the girl I choose for me. And that's all that fucking matters." My eyes widen at this because he read my mind. He knew exactly what I was thinking. "No more fucking arguing," he grunts as his mouth slams down on mine.

Swallowing any more protests I would have made, he possesses me in a kiss so deep I can't breathe. As our tongues tangle, I feel him moving, and before I know it, there's a mattress under my back, and he's whipped his shirt off so swiftly that there's only a second between us not touching.

My hands immediately seek out the heat of his bare chest as he comes down on top of me, his body covering me from head to toe, warming me from the cold I always feel. Fevered and excited, my legs move of their own accord, cradling

Nolan's hips between my thighs, knowing physically what it takes to care for a man with my body.

Licking across my lips, I open for him, and he delves inside, kissing and sucking with more hunger than I thought possible. I feel his desire, his *need* for me, through the carnal kiss. It's nearly overwhelming. My own craving for more makes me lose my head.

Moaning into his mouth, I feel his hands travelling down my body, pushing my pants down my hips, past my thighs, and soon his fingers replace my panties. Covering the areas of my body no one else has ever seen or touched.

"Nolan," I breathe on a whisper, begging, pleading, questioning.

"Right here, pretty girl. I'm right here with you." He pants against my lips as our eyes meet while his fingers explore my sex, rubbing across the lips and pushing through the tightness of my entrance. "I knew," he groans as I feel his fingers inside me. "I knew you were a virgin, but I didn't realize the effect it would have on me. The effect *you* would have on me, my pretty little Bea."

Nolan

The way her eyes intensify with just a little bit of lauding has me feeling like a fucking king. She's oblivious to what a precious gift she truly is, and I'm fucking glad as hell that I'll be the one spending a lifetime showing her how much I need her. Want, crave, desire her. Bea hasn't a clue.

She's so damn innocent to the world that she eats up everything I say, and I can only hope she's absorbing it as well. With her eyes closed and her fingers gliding up and down my chest, I pull her clothes the rest of the way off.

Goddamn.

Stunning beauty.

Bea is everything I never knew I needed. Small, compact, the perfect size to cradle me within her body. I hunger for the tightness I know she will bring when I start fucking her. And that's all I can do for now.

Fuck her.

I'm too worked up to be gentle.

Too primed to be soft and sweet.

But I don't believe she wants those things. Bea has been handled in such a way that she's never known either. Controlled chaos is what she needs and exactly what I'm going to give her.

"Spread your knees," I demand as I begin taking off the rest of my clothes. Nibbling her lip, a blush creeps up her chest as she slowly does my bidding. "All the way." Draping my hands on either knee, I push her open as wide as she's able. "That's a good girl." I praise her, and she lights up with a delicate smile, and her honey-colored eyes radiate.

Gliding my fingers from her knee to the apex of her thighs, where her snug cunt pulses needily to be filled with my cock, I slick my finger with her moisture before circling her clit with light pressure.

"Mmmm," she moans, biting her lip as her hips raise for more force.

“Like that?” She hesitates a second before agreeing. “Me too,” I concur. Leaning between her legs, I don’t touch her where she anticipates. Instead, I suck a nipple into my mouth, working the nub into a hardened peak before moving on to the other one.

“Yes.” She releases the soft word on a hiss of breath as I suck her into my mouth. I feel the heat of her pussy just centimeters away from where I want to be pounding into her. “Nolan,” she cries out when I bite the tip of her nipple, flicking the turgid flesh with my tongue. “Please.” *Christ*, I could listen to her beg all fucking day long.

“Please, what?” I want to hear the dirty words come from her mouth. To tell me exactly what she desires. I need to hear it; I long for it.

Looking up her body, I see the hesitance in her eyes; she wants to say the words but doesn’t know how. I see her; I see everything about my precious little Bea.

“Say it,” I rasp against her smooth skin, my fingers still petting her slick pussy. That’s how I know she likes this. She enjoys the demands I make. Loves the way I suck on her luscious tits.

But what she says next has me pausing. “P-p-please, Daddy.”

My eyes widen.

Her body flames the deepest crimson I’ve ever seen.

A sheen of tears coats her eyes when I don’t respond.

What she doesn’t know, can’t know, is that I had no idea how much I would revel in those words. How much I would need to hear them.

Because even I didn't know.

Climbing up her body as her eyes close with mortification, I grip the underside of her jaw with one hand and clutch her hair in the other as I slam through her constricted cunt. Bea leaves out a deafening scream that'll wake the dead as I rip through her unyielding barrier. Forcing myself past her virginity, I'm balls deep when I lick along her jaw, nibbling on her earlobe as I grunt my pleasure.

"Again," I demand on a rough growl. "Fucking say it again, little girl."

I'm fucking sick.

Her body trembles under me. Her thighs contract against my hips.

"Please, Daddy." Her voice is barely a whisper in my ear. "Take me. Make me yours."

My hand tightens on her throat after the second word, my hips buck, and my cock swells. "I'm going to fill you so fucking full of my seed, it's going to be dripping down your thighs for a week." She flutters around my dick, and we both let out a groan.

With my head buried in her throat, I suck on the delicate flesh as my hips forcefully move. I need in her deeper. Harder. I need fucking more, and I don't know how to get it. Releasing my hold on her hair, I hook her leg over my elbow and lift it as high as she can handle.

"Oh fuck, there it is. There's that depth I need." She's barely letting me withdraw with how hard her cunt is sucking me in.

"It hurts," she whines, breathless because my hand is still wrapped tightly around her throat.

“Good. I want it to hurt. I want your fucking tears.” I’m a fucking monster, but I yearn for her pain so I can soothe her. I need to be her everything.

Watching as the tears leak from the corners of her eyes, I lick the cool liquid up and nip at her cheek. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* I’ve never been so violent with a woman before; I shouldn’t be with the one I want to keep for the rest of my life.

“Oh, Daddy...there,” she gasps, her eyes aglow with ecstasy, and I realize it’s just who we are together. This side of us would never have surfaced with anyone else but each other.

“Cry for me, little one; cry for Daddy.” Slamming forward with enough force to break something, Bea’s nails dig into my sides where she grasps onto me, scratching and scraping across my flesh. Marking me.

Just as *I’m* marking her.

I can tell her orgasm is imminent, and mine will follow along right after. It’s building in the base of my spine, tingling all over my body. When I feel a gush of fluid coat my dick, I bite her neck and hold on for dear life as we explode together.

“Hurts so good,” she coos, and I finally release her throat. I know exactly what’s about to happen. Emotion floods her system, and she screams louder than when I ripped her pussy in half.

“Scream for me, pretty girl,” I murmur in her ear. “Scream for Daddy.” Pummeling into her one last time, I continue to come inside her tightness, as deep as I can get.

She ripples around me as her body flies to the heavens and back, tensing and relaxing. Struggling to contain everything

we've just done. As she grows limp, I roll over. She drapes across me, my semi-hard dick still inside her.

Rubbing my heated hands across her flesh, it only takes a moment before she's out cold, and I'm left wondering what the fuck just happened.

Never in my life have I experienced anything like that before. I didn't even know it was possible to be so overwhelmed by pleasure that you nearly black out. But fuck, the way Bea surrendered to me, to calling me Daddy, is the most beautiful thing I've ever witnessed.

I didn't lie when I said she's mine now. I'm never fucking letting her go.

Chapter 7

Bea

As I wake up, birds can be heard chirping, a breeze blows as the curtains billow around the window, and for once, for the first time in my life, my mind is clear. There's no doubt plaguing me, no lingering words of hurt from the day before. Nothing and no one is calling for me, telling me I'm lazy, useless, and ungrateful.

It's blissfully silent.

And it's all thanks to Nolan.

I don't understand how I got so lucky as to meet him that night, forgotten and alone, and not once did he ever treat me as anything other than a woman. Perhaps a fragile one, at first, but since explaining my condition to him, he still doesn't see me as less than.

He's a gift I never dared to dream of.

Stretching out in the spacious bed, I don't miss the now-cool sheets where Nolan laid for most of the night, but I try not to think on it too hard as my body protests the way we made love all night long. Or it felt that way.

Darting up, I suddenly remember the things I said...the things *we* said. "Oh, my god." I drop back as my heart pounds.

Daddy.

I called him that. Repeatedly. I don't even know where it came from or why. That's why he's not here anymore. In the moment, it was hot and different, and he likely was too worked up to tell me how gross it was.

Except he played along, too. That niggling voice in my head gives me some comfort as I remember his words. *Come for Daddy.*

Oh my god.

I don't know how I'll get up and face him. I feel my cheeks flaming with embarrassment as my heart thunders violently behind my ribcage.

I've never drawn a boy's interest before, let alone a virile man like Nolan. I don't even know what to do with his attention half the time. But apparently, if you get me into bed, I turn into a wanton vixen.

Nolan probably can't wait to return me to the hell he rescued me from. I know I would if I were him. All the taunting of my past comes haunting back, and I'm on the verge of tears when I throw the blanket aside and rush to the bathroom.

Heaving over the toilet, I feel wretched. Mentally, emotionally, I'm so off-kilter that my head swims with so much agony that my eyes throb.

"I've heard women get pretty bad morning sickness after conception, but I didn't think it happened quite this fast." Nolan's teasing voice from behind me turns my stomach to lead as my body stills.

"What?" I breathe out, ripping off some toilet paper to wipe my mouth before flushing.

My whole body turns to stone when I feel him drape something over my back, and he pulls my hair away from my face and to the side, kissing along the column of my throat. “I’m good, pretty girl, but even I don’t think I’ve planted my seed in that belly so quickly. Though, I’d like to believe I have.” His hand circles my body, and his fingers flex over my stomach.

Out of breath, I warble, “What?”

His affable chuckle tickles my neck as he helps me to my feet, guiding me over to the sink. Running the water cold, he lowers my wrist under the stream to help calm me down. “We didn’t use protection last night, Bea, and we won’t in the future. The only protection your body will ever have from me is when you’re pregnant.” My head spins.

“You want a baby with me?” He’s insane. He has to be.

Turning off the faucet, he grabs a towel from next to the sink and gently pats my hands dry before turning me around to face him. “My pretty, darling girl, I want everything with you.” His eyes grow dark and fill with the same heat as last night; his body tenses and ripples. I register the pounding of his heart through his bare chest and feel the evidence of his desire behind his basketball shorts as he rubs against me.

“You do?” I must sound so stupid to him.

“Yeah, Bean.” I grimace at the use of my full name, and he laughs. “I know you hate it, but I’m going to whisper it in your ear so often you’ll learn to love it because you should cherish everything about yourself.” His lips find their way to my neck again, laving and sucking along the length.

I wish I had his confidence about that.

“So, you’re not, uhm...” *Why did I start this?* “You’re not...that is...I didn’t...” *Crap.*

“Freaked out that you called me Daddy while I was balls-deep in your slick cunt?” My body tingles at his description.

“Yeah, that,” I say on an exhale as my shoulders loosen.

“Baby, you can call me Daddy anytime you like; just know that if you do it outside of the bed, it’s the quickest way for me to find the nearest flat surface so I can fuck you until you can’t see straight.”

“Oh.” I guess that answers all my fears. Kind of. Because what if he’s just being nice? I’m my own worst enemy right now.

I haven’t a clue how to be...whatever we are. I don’t even know how to be me half the time.

“Brush your teeth so I can kiss you properly, and then come downstairs. I’ve got breakfast warming for us.” Covering my mouth, I motion for him to go, and he reaches down to grab me a spare toothbrush and paste before exiting.

Alone, I can breathe again. Nolan is a presence in his own right. He’s overwhelming and assertive, and I’m wary about how to handle that. No one like him has played a part in my life before.

Quickly cleaning up, I banish all thoughts from my head. I need a break from myself, and cleaning has always given me that, or drawing.

Nolan

Leaning against the counter in my kitchen, I can hear Bean walking around upstairs and deduce that she's cleaning the bathroom. Probably because of some bullshit at home. I'll give her five more minutes to bring her cute ass down here before I go after her.

When I awoke this morning, just as the sun had been rising, I spent some time watching her sleep and came to a decision. After a quick call to Danny-boy, I had half my assets transferred to her name, and the other half will revert to her if anything ever happens to me. No matter what transpires after that arrest warrant is issued for me, I want her taken care of.

I spoke to my father, Luther, as well. Made him promise me he would ensure she was able to stay in this house. That she would be protected by the family, though she'd never ask for it. Bea seems to accept whatever fate callously offers her, and guaranteeing that it's only good things from now on is the easiest thing I've ever done.

However, now, my parents are eager to meet the woman who has overtaken my world in the span of a very short weekend. If there's one thing that all the men in my family have in common, aside from our ruthless personalities, it's discerning when we've found the singular woman to complete the other half of our souls.

And for me, there wasn't a single second of doubt. The more time I spend with her, the more I'm certain of it, too.

She's skeptical, rightfully so. Her family is nothing but a bunch of abusive assholes who don't deserve to spend a second in her presence.

The one and only thing I've had a hard time figuring out is how to emancipate her. Despite being an adult, her parents

have power over her medical and physical needs and well-being due to her condition.

I have no idea if they physically abuse her or not, but if they have, and I can help prove it, she'd be released from their hold over her. I've heard of people marrying to get kinship transferred, but I don't know if I could convince her to do that. She was barely holding on upstairs.

Her fear of calling me Daddy in the heat of the moment was what sent her into a tailspin, and I'm certain she's still unsure of her place in my life. Even if I'm not. I have my work cut out for me when it comes to Bea, but I'm up for the challenge, and until she tells me to fuck off, there isn't much that could get me to back off.

With the sound of her soft steps padding down the stairs and slowly into the kitchen, I let loose a satisfied grin when she wanders into the open space of the first floor wearing a large t-shirt of mine that I left on the bed.

"Looks better on you than it does on me." Holding out a hand for her, I wait until the trepidation is overshadowed by her need to be near me. Dragging her into my arms, I tilt her chin up and kiss her.

It's not quick or slow. Rather, deep and possessive as I clutch her body against mine, holding her as tight and close as I can without crawling into her pussy, where I want to be most in the world.

My cock grows hard and heavy as I begin to attack her mouth with all the vigor I can. Desire races through my bloodstream, firing up my nerve endings and making me feel a thousand times more sensitive when her delicate fingers graze my chest.

Running my tongue against the roof of her mouth with the same gentleness as her fingertips, feeling the softness of her cheek, I'm aware I can never let her go. I'll never have this feeling of wanting to care for her and possess her with another woman. Not in this lifetime or another.

I fist one hand in her hair and the other in the curve of her back, putting pressure on my massive hard-on. I want her to touch me, scrape her fingernails across the steely length behind my shorts. But I know if she were to touch me right now, I'd more than likely come in her hands, making a mess of her perfectness.

And I wouldn't regret a single fucking second of it.

Gradually, I feel her hands moving up my chest, nails scratching along my throat before she's brushing her fingers through my hair, scraping across my scalp, and pulling the length of hair in her fingers. Her tongue plays with mine as she moans her desire. Growing bolder, she presses into me on her tiptoes and tangles our tongues, licking across the roof of my mouth like I did to her.

Picking her up, I spin her around to sit on the counter and shove my shorts down. With one quick thrust, I'm seated in her pussy, precisely as I've wanted to be, and she growls as her head drops back, exposing her slender throat.

I don't hesitate to latch onto her as my hips pump wildly, furiously, into her tightness. Sucking her fine flesh, I leave my mark on her body for the *world* to see as I also mark the inside of her body for *us* to see.

"Fuck, pretty girl, tighten up for Daddy. Suck me inside this precious little cunt of mine." She shivers at my command, questioning whether to say it or not, and I'm determined to get it out of her.

I pound her helplessly. Her body drops back to drape across the counter, and I rip the shirt off without hesitation. Exposing her slight frame, her flawless flesh draws me in, and I draw a nipple into my mouth, suckling on her like a starving man.

Her legs slide up my body, and I feel myself readying to blast off inside her welcoming warmth. “Oh, Daddy, please, more.” *Magic words.*

We implode in a frenzied need to come together as quickly and harshly as possible in a vortex of need and desire. Bea detonates around my cock, and I’m helpless to do anything but follow her into oblivion.

“Fuck, Bean, just like that. Come all over Daddy’s cock.” Her glazed eyes meet mine, and while the shyness remains, so too is gratefulness that I accept this part of her. The need to be taken care of and shown what a real man is like.

Climbing up her body, I suck on the other nipple, mimicking what our children will do to her, and I can’t fucking wait to taste the provisions she’ll provide for our babies one day.

“Nolan.” Her pleased gasp is filled with so many questions.

“You’re like an angel dropped into my lap,” I grunt as I pull back to look at her. “I don’t deserve any part of you for the things I’ve done, will do, but I’ll be damned if I ever give you back.”

Pulling Bea up with me, I help her off the counter and watch with fascination as my seed drips down her thighs. Our mixed pleasure is far more erotic than anything I’ve ever witnessed.

The blush creeping up her body is adorable as she realizes what I'm staring at. "Oh dear." She tries to hide it.

"Uh-uh." Gripping her legs with a firm hand, I hold them open, admiring her nudity. "One day, you won't be embarrassed by this, and I'll help you get there, but don't, for a second, think I don't find this hot as hell." Swiping my finger through our mixed fluids, I run it along her swollen pussy lips, soaking in the sounds of my girl's ecstasy.

"Go get dressed, and then we'll eat." Slapping her ass as she darts around me, her squeal makes my dick hard again.

Bea

I feel like a different person than the girl who woke up this morning. Nolan squashed any thoughts of doubt I had over the way we were together. I still blush, thinking about the things he said or the way he touched me, but I no longer feel like they're wrong.

Everything about him is right.

At least, I've convinced myself of that.

I'm not sure how long it will last because I feel like a shoe is about to drop on us and our little bubble of happiness. There isn't much I want from life, but I'm quickly realizing that the one major thing I need, crave, can't live without is Nolan Sutton.

He's larger than life, darker than death, but with me, he's a person I don't think even *he* recognizes, and the more I watch him, the more I realize he doesn't even care.

Nolan has a carefree attitude that calls to me. Makes me wish for things I never knew I wanted to be. In the twenty-four or so hours that we've been back at his house, I've felt less stress than any other day, and it makes me think that I can have this life with him. That I can trust all the promises he keeps making me.

"You're looking rather pensive for my liking," he grunts as he measures a piece of wood. I mentioned how nice a bookcase would look in his living room, and the next thing I knew, the materials were being delivered. He then promised a trip to a bookstore first thing tomorrow morning.

"Just thinking," I say from my spot on his back porch in the lounge chairs he has there, while he works on the gravel driveway between the garage and house.

"About?" He doesn't look at me as he sets up the wood to be cut.

"You." His grin is wicked as his eyes lift to meet mine. Heat, pure unadulterated heat, reflects back at me.

"Right here, babe. No need to think about it; just take what you want." My smile is strained because as playful as I enjoy him being, that wasn't what I was thinking about, and I feel confident he knows that, but he's always trying to lighten the mood.

"It's been a long time since I didn't fear an episode happening," I finally confess. Nolan's shoulders tense as he works, and the sound of the saw cuts through the quietness of the afternoon.

As the buzzing subsides, he stands straight and glances up at me. "How often does it happen?"

I already know he won't like the answer. "Usually a couple of times a month. The doctors say it shouldn't if I lead an unobtrusive life. The happier I am, the less frequent they'll be is essentially the gist of it." I'm not sure if that's actually true or not. "Stress and trauma are the leading culprits of each occurrence."

"They hurt you?" There's a menace in his tone, deadly and aimed at whoever has caused me pain.

I can't deny it, so I drop my eyes, not answering but not committing to a truth when the truth is, it's not my father. It's my stepmother and half-sisters who cause the anguish. Not that father's placid attitude helps. He continually tries to make up for his indiscretion, and Flora won't ever let him forget it.

Most days, I try not to blame her. I can't imagine having a constant reminder of her husband's infidelity around is easy. Once I was old enough to understand that was why everyone hated me, I attempted to remain out of sight and out of mind. I didn't want to be the reason for anyone's pain, but it seems I was unsuccessful and have been punished for it forever.

"Yes, then." Nolan curses up a storm, and a thunderous look crosses his face before he closes his eyes and inhales deeply, muttering something to himself that I can't make out.

"It's not so bad," I tell him. Mostly slaps and shoves, bruises, and a few cuts. Nothing I couldn't ever heal from. But I don't say that out loud. I get the feeling he'd go on a rampage and feel no remorse for the carnage he left in his wake.

"Not so bad?" A bark of humorless laughter floats on the breeze as he shakes his head. "Not so bad is a cold coffee when you want it hot. Not so bad is getting stuck at a train light. Not so bad is when you can't get into a concert you

didn't realize was coming to town." I twitch under his scrutiny because, for years, I've been convincing myself that my life's not so bad, but he's right. It sucks.

"What do you want out of life, Bea?" His question causes me to blink. I've never thought about that before.

Staring down at the drawing pad in my lap, my eyes roam across the sketch of Nolan. Shirtless, sweating, muscles bulging, and I realize pretty quickly. "You."

Chapter 8

Nolan

I built her the bookcase she never would have asked for. I took her shopping for every book she could carry this morning. And now, I'm staring at Holden, Bishop, and Hendrix in my driveway.

Coming down the gravel road is my father's Audi behind the sheriff's car with the warrant for my arrest, and behind them is my lawyer. I knew this was coming. It's why I've taken so many steps to protect Bea. Why I spent all of last night and most of today inside her pliable body.

I'm confident my family will protect her at all costs. Bishop and Hendrix have even agreed to remain on the property, out of sight, just in case her family pulls anything. While I don't think her father will, I wouldn't put anything past her stepmother. The woman is the devil in a meat suit. She hasn't got a single compassionate bone in her body where the defenseless Bea is concerned.

In the early morning hours, I spent some time writing her notes in the book she carries with her everywhere because I imagined this would stress her beyond her limits, and I won't be here to protect her. I won't be here to prevent the memory loss, and it fucking pisses me off.

“We can stop this,” Holden growls as the cruiser comes to a halt a few feet away. Holden is the biggest rule-breaker I’ve ever known, and the fact that I’m going willingly pisses him off.

“I got this.” And I do. I have a plan. But nobody knows what it is because I need to play this close to the vest. I *need* everyone to be pissed.

I’ll beg for Bea’s forgiveness when all is said and done.

“You’ll meet with her father tomorrow, right, Bish?” The man glares at me but nods.

“I’ve got it.”

“Nolan Sutton?” An officer I don’t recognize climbs out of the car as three more cruisers come racing down my driveway.

“Hold your fucking horses, son,” my dad barks, and the fool has the gall to glare at one of Florida’s deadliest foes.

“Nolan?” Bea’s soft voice calls from the door of the house. I had asked her to stay inside and to trust my family, but she had so many questions. Far more than I could give her answers to.

“Pretty girl.” I turn to look at her, taking the steps in one giant leap. “I told you to stay inside.”

Her scared eyes cast across the busy yard. “They sent for your arrest, didn’t they?”

“Mr. Sutton!” the same officer calls out. “We have a warrant for your arrest for the kidnapping of Bean Plant Daley. Please come back down here.” The niceties are just that, formal and misleading. His command is ignored, nevertheless.

“I’ll be back,” I promise her, pushing stray hair behind her ear. “I’m not going for long. They won’t keep me from you.

Nothing will.”

Tears swim in her eyes, and it guts me like a gullet knife through my chest. I’d rather die than be the reason for her pain. “I need you to remember, Bea. I need you to stay calm and let what’s going to happen, happen, because I will be back. I’ll be buried inside your supple pussy for days when I do, and when we finally come up for air, you’re going to be my wife. You got that?”

I know she hears me. Her breath hitches, and her body shivers, but her mind—fuck me—her beautiful mind is taking over the rest of her, forcing her into a stress-induced state that I won’t be able to bring her back from. Not this time; there isn’t time.

“Ma!” I shout, knowing she’s here.

“I’m coming,” she calls back, and I hear a feral growl from my father.

“Lay one fucking finger on her, and I’ll make you eat it.” They must be trying to stop her from coming up.

Cupping Bea’s cheeks in my hands, I kiss her deeply, promising her in that one act that I’ll never be far from her. Nobody could keep me from her side for long. She’s just got to trust that I’ll keep my word.

“I love you, pretty girl.” Kissing up her jaw, I bite her earlobe and whisper for her ears only, “Be a good girl for Daddy.” Her surprised gasp makes me grin as I pull away from her.

“Take care of her for me, Ma.” Kissing the woman’s cheek, she nods and pats mine like she did when I was a kid and getting into shit.

“I’ve got her, son.”

Holden, Bishop, and Hendrix take a step back as I come through. My lawyer, James something-or-other, tells them, “One mark on him, and I’ll have your jobs. He’s not resisting. He’s coming willingly.”

The cuffs circle my wrists, and as I’m being led to the cruiser, another car pulls into the driveway. I see Morris, Flora, and two other people get out. One is a woman in a fancy suit, and another is a man in scrubs.

Motherfucker.

I didn’t think they’d get here so quickly, but I figured they’d come for her, likely intending to institutionalize her, but I didn’t think it could happen so quickly.

“Morris!” I hiss his name, and the man draws back in fear. “These cuffs won’t stop me from beheading you if you lock her up.” There’s so much malice in my voice, the air seems to freeze as everyone stares at me. “I won’t stop with you, either. I’ll come for *her* and your other daughters, too. Nobody you love or care about will be off-limits to my wrath.”

“Is that a threat, Mr. Sutton?” the idiot finds the backbone to ask.

“No, you asshole; it’s a fucking promise.”

Bea

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

My body tenses. My vision blackens around the edges. My heart palpitates.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

My fingernails dig into my palms as I work to regain control.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

If I repeat his name in my mind enough, I'm hoping it will stave off my memory loss. I'm hoping I won't forget. I'm hoping to remain sane.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

I've been standing on the front porch of his house since he was escorted away in the back of a police cruiser by officers who seemed to have some kind of vendetta against him. I haven't been able to move. I don't want to. Not until he returns home.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

He promised he'd come back to me. It's been hours; the sun is beginning to set. His family is throwing worried glances my way.

He promised.

And I'm holding onto it. It's all that I have right now. Moving from this spot will be akin to plucking a string from a ball of yarn and watching it unravel.

If I move, if I leave the spot where I last saw him, where he last touched me, where he made me promises he clearly didn't have any business making, I'll forget.

And I can't afford to forget.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

"Bea?" I inhale sharply at his mother's voice. Ariel, she's every bit as beautiful as the mermaid and just as kind. "Please, won't you come inside, dear?" I hear the worry in her voice. I

hate that I'm the one to put it there because she should be more concerned over her son than me.

"You should hate me," I whisper, the breeze from the wind carrying my words away.

"Why on earth would I hate you?" Coming to stand in front of me, her hands reach out for mine, but I can't bring myself to move.

"Because Nolan was arrested thanks to me. It's my fault." *It's always my fault.* Everything bad that's happened in anyone's life that I've known since birth has been my fault. "I never should have gone to him. I never should have let him bring me here."

"Oh, darling, no. Nolan is a man of many mysteries and just as many skills. He has a plan, and we need to trust in that plan."

How I wish I had her confidence. I figured the other shoe would drop. I felt it yesterday. That sense of foreboding that always appeared whenever something good happened to me. It's always there.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

Shaking my head, I close my eyes and will away my presence in their lives. If only it were that easy. Maybe I should have left with my parents earlier. They tried to make me. The social worker and doctor from whatever facility they had enrolled me in insisted I join them.

Had Nolan's family not been here, I'd have had no choice. I wouldn't have been able to fight any of them off. I was glad, at first, that they weren't able to force me. I have no idea what Luther said to make them leave, but their faces were quite pale when they scurried off.

“I’m sorry, Nolan,” I whisper as the last of the sun dips in the sky, enveloping us in the comfy glow of light from inside the house and the cool breeze of the stormy night air.

I can sense the rain in the air. Sense the energy of the thunderstorm brewing in the dark clouds. Fitting, really, for how I feel.

Turbulent. Wild. Scared.

So terrified it hurts to breathe.

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

How I wish I hadn’t ruined your life.

Chapter 9

Nolan

I don't know what's up the sheriff's ass, but he sure has a hard-on for me. I was left in a cold-ass interrogation room all night before being moved to holding and getting booked. Now, he's making arrangements to have me sent straight to the Tri-County Correctional Facility with some hardcore bastards.

He thinks he's scaring me. When in reality, all he's doing is ensuring I come for him when I get out because his little game of cat and mouse is going to keep me from Bea even longer than I anticipated.

If not for the quick meeting with my lawyer this morning and his informing me that Bea is still at my house and doing fine, I'd be plotting a prison break. But that would get me some hard time, and I have no interest in being away from Bea for that long.

"You're being moved within the hour," Deputy Barnes, Holden's contact in the department, informs me as he's reading a report a few feet from where I'm locked up. "Holden has a request for you."

"What?" I hiss, growing angrier by the minute. I guess good ol' James wasn't able to stop the transfer.

"The Deviant Sinners MC has a guy in TCCF, and he needs protection. He's a young one and should be getting out

any day now, but some guys are messing with him, and they don't have anyone on the inside." Our relationship with the Sinners is fairly new, but if they're asking for favors this early in our association, I have to assume he's important to them.

"Who?" I only need a name.

"Griffin Webster. He's the younger brother of one of their girls, only seventeen."

My gaze whips around to glare at Barnes. "What the fuck is he doing in there, then?" No way in hell a kid should be locked up there.

"The girl wouldn't service the arresting officer. The kid's her punishment." Poor Barnes looks a little sick. We've asked him to do a lot of things over the years; never once would he pull this kind of shit on us or vice versa.

"Yeah, I've got him. You let them know he's leaving when I do." Barnes nods, not bothering to ask how I'll make that happen. Which is good because I'm not sure I know the answer to that, either.

"Sutton!" the sheriff calls as he comes ambling back into the cell block like he owns the room. "Time to go, boy." A malevolent grin adorns his face, and I recognize that what's about to happen isn't something I'm going to like.

But *he's* going to like it even less when I'm out and done with him.

"Hey, Barnes." The kid looks up at me. "Make sure you're ready to become sheriff when I get out. This clown's job will be all yours real soon."

His eyes widen, and I smirk at the sheriff as he growls at me. He knows who I am and what I'll do if I get my hands on

him. There's nowhere he'll be able to run from me, and I can't fucking wait for it.

Transfer complete? Check.

Body cavity search? Check.

Ice cold hose down? Fucking check.

Humiliation? Incomplete.

I don't embarrass easily. No matter how hard these assholes try to fuck with me, they won't win. Not with a man like me. I was raised to be kind and compassionate to my family and the woman I'll claim as my own and nobody else.

Because nobody else matters.

What they do to me doesn't matter, either.

I was trained to endure torture, first by my uncle Dimitri and then by the Army, and again when I came home. To make sure I hadn't grown soft.

They won't break me.

Sitting in the yard on one of the benches, my eyes roam around the men surrounding me. All hardened criminals. All ready and willing to kill for one wrong look.

It doesn't take me long to figure out who belongs to what group and register the division by the color of their skin. The only thing they have in common is being locked up here.

"Fresh meat!" I hear someone yell, and I tense. At first, thinking they're going to fuck with me, but then I catch the commotion over by one of the entrances and realize it's Griffin they're talking about.

Fucking seventeen and locked up in this shit hole. His sister must have denied someone powerful because nobody should have approved his incarceration here.

My gaze follows his slide against the wall until he reaches a corner. *Wrong move, kid.* He's begging to be assaulted over there.

Groaning, I get to my feet, acknowledging that my protection detail has already begun as five skinheads make their way over to him. One of them is licking his chops, and I can only imagine what the boy has gone through to this point.

Shoving my way through the crowd, I tower a few inches over most of the men in here, and I can easily see the way Griffin shrinks back, sensing more than seeing the hunters that are after him.

"Griff!" I shout his name, and all heads whip around to stare at me.

The new guy.

The actual fresh meat.

I doubt he knows why I'm calling for him or that my main job is to protect him. He'll learn soon, however.

"Who the fuck are you?" one meathead growls.

Cocking my head to the side, I have two choices here. Answer him or pop him in the mouth. I opt for cracking his previously chipped teeth. "Names Nolan Sutton. The kid's with me."

A couple of guys shoot questioning glances around, but most recognize my name. I accept that much of the fear is because of who my father is and the destruction he created in

his younger years. Right now, I don't give a shit. So long as they all back the fuck off.

Two of the meatheads' friends don't get the memo, though. Coming at me from left and right, the crowd around us goes from weary to energized, and I know there's no way I'm coming out of this without smashing their skulls together.

Stretching my neck from side to side, I crack my knuckles and give them both a come get it motion with my hands. They charge like angry bulls.

Heads down, half bent, they don't have their eyes on the prize. Lucky for me, I do. As soon as they're in reach, I place my palms on the side of their faces and bash their heads against each other. Their momentum carries them forward another step or two, but then they drop to the ground, out cold. Blood dripping from their torn flesh as they lay in a crumpled mess at my feet.

"Anyone else?" The damage isn't much, but it's enough to send a message.

Don't fuck with me.

Bea

Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.

I remember the name. The feeling the name evokes. But why I know it or why I feel a sense of safety because of it is foreign.

Who is he?

Why do I wish he were here?

Why can't I remember?

I've gone to sleep twice, woken up twice, all with no memory except his name. There's a persistent buzzing sound in my head that grows increasingly annoying by the second, and despite the help and comfort from the people around me, nothing ignites my memory.

My distress grows exponentially by the lack of progress, which only worsens my condition. I've wondered a thousand times if this is what it was like the other times I've forgotten, how often it happens, but then I remember I can't remember anything at all.

"Bea? What about this?" Nolan's mother, Ariel, holds up a bottle for me at the supermarket, and I tilt my head, trying to recall if I like the cherry drink, and shrug.

She had the idea that if I could recollect some of the things I like, maybe it would help rekindle my memory. They were told by Nolan, who was told by me, that it's always come back. Usually overnight. However, not this time, and I'm terrified that it's permanent now.

Taking the bottle from her hand, she turns to look for another so I can inspect this one without feeling pressured. Reading the label, my eyes close, and I have a flash of a vision of being around a campfire and enjoying the bubbly fruit taste on my tongue.

"Yes," I whisper, holding onto the feeling. "Yes, I like this one."

Ariel turns with a triumphant smile and loads four more into the cart. "Perfect! It's one of Nolan's favorites, too. He keeps them stashed away everywhere but swears they're only good when they're cold."

“He said that to me, as well, when he offered me one to try.” We both freeze at my words. The revelation they reveal. “He said that to me, too,” I repeat, and my eyes crowd with emotion. It’s the first time I’ve felt like I could retain anything from before.

“Oh, this is just wonderful.” Ariel’s smile is infectious. “What about cookies?” She already confessed to me that she has an affection for anything with a fudge center. Holding up two boxes, she asks, “Oreos or Maple?”

“Maple.” She drops the box in the cart.

“Fudgeos or Graham?”

“Fudgeos.” Another two boxes in.

“Wafers or Fig Newtons?”

I grimace. “Neither.”

“I’m with you.” Both go back on the shelf. “How about milk for dunking?” I nod, and she starts walking towards the coolers at the back of the store, but I’m stopped by something on a shelf.

Picking it up, I trace the image on the box. Melted marshmallows on top of chocolate and graham crackers.

S’mores.

We had these.

While camping.

Sawyer and Nolan lured me into their late-night snack with the promise of this messy, gooey treat. That night brings a smile to my face. In spite of how afraid I was, Nolan and Sawyer took such good care of me. They didn’t treat me like I was less than. I was just an ordinary girl having a bad day.

Gasping as I realize the memory brings me a feeling of joy, I look for Ariel to tell her about it, but I don't see her. I can't say I remember everything because I can't even picture Nolan's face; I'm just happy to have recalled something.

Holding the box to my chest, I rush out of the aisle, and as I round the corner, I run smack dab into a masculine chest. "I'm so sorry. Excuse me."

The person's firm grip holds me in place. "What's the rush?" The way he says it makes me still, and I swallow against a dry throat.

"Who are you?" I don't know if we've met. I hope not. It's always embarrassing to bump into someone I know but can't remember. Holden and Noelle never blinked yesterday when they came to visit, when I didn't recognize them. It was nice not to be judged.

His head cocks to the side, and I imagine him being annoyed, so I try to take a step back. "You don't remember?" Staring into his shrewd eyes, I try to regain a shred of anything, even a feeling, but nothing comes.

"I'm sorry, but I don't." Embarrassment colors my cheeks, but he doesn't move away, doesn't say anything more. He just stares at me.

A hard glint enters his eyes, and before I know what's happening, there's a prick in my neck from behind, and I'm immediately dizzy. "What—" I don't get to finish as the edges of my vision quickly darken, and I'm dumped upside down as I'm carried through the store. My ears buzz, and my head swims as I dry-heave against the man's back right before I'm thrown into the back of a vehicle.

Chapter 10

Nolan

“**W**hat!” Never in my life have I yelled at my parents. Not when they told me something happened to Lake but couldn’t figure out what. Not when they were pissed I’d enlisted because Mom was terrified I wouldn’t come home. Not even when Holden and I disposed of the bodies of Noelle’s parents, and they didn’t like that we wouldn’t reveal where.

“Where the fuck is she? Why wasn’t someone with her?” Slamming my fist on the table in front of me, I gain the attention of a few guards and realize I must calm down, or they’ll send me back to my cell. I can’t afford to have that happen. “Where the fuck is James? Why aren’t I out yet?”

“I’m so sorry, Nolan,” Mom cries, and I know she feels awful. I don’t blame her. I don’t really blame anyone but myself for not being out of this hellhole yet.

“I know, Ma. It’s not your fault.” I wish I could hug her, but this fucking tempered glass keeps us apart.

“James is working overtime to get you out. The sheriff’s accusations are holding a lot of sway,” my father says, but I can see he’s got an idea to have the man change his mind. “Two days tops.”

I need to accept that because I can't do anything else. "I assume Holden and Daniel have checked all the surveillance around the supermarket?" Dad nods. "What about her parents?"

"They're still at the campground. Haven't left."

"The sisters?" Those catty bitches didn't show any more love to my girl than her stepmother did. I wouldn't put it past them to have done something.

"They spend more time on social media and taking photos for it than actually paying attention to the world around them." Dad shakes his head at their nonsense.

"She was so happy to have known just a few things she likes, Nolan. I just wanted to try something new. I wanted to help her." Tears hover in Mom's eyes, and I fucking hate it. She's the best person I know and doesn't deserve how she feels right now.

"I know, Ma. Don't blame yourself. You've treated her ten times better than anyone before you. You're the mother she deserved to have, and if it's the last fucking thing I do, you'll be the one she gets."

"Times up!" one of the guards yells.

"We'll find her, son; just be safe in there. How's the kid?" Dad likely has to report back to the MC on how Griff is doing.

"He's fine. His cell is next to mine. The cellmate won't touch him after the things I promised to do if one hair on his head was out of place."

"James is on it. He'll get you both out." With that promise from Dad, I'm escorted from the visitors' center and to one of the communal rooms.

Seeing Griffin at a table playing a game of Solitaire, I sit across from him as some of the rowdier inmates are let in, and a fight erupts over the lone TV in the corner.

“Why you in here, Griffin?” There’s more to the story. There always is.

“I’m gay. The deputy who arrested me caught me and his son together. He decided I was assaulting Adam. I wasn’t, and he arrested me.” He acts like it’s no big deal, but I see the hurt in his eyes.

“How’d your sister get involved?”

“You know she’s part of the club, right?” I confirm that I do. “She’s not one of the pass-around girls. She works behind the bar. Been in love with the SAA for longer than I could ever say. The deputy thought she was fucking the guys there, but she only serves up drinks on the weekends and does the books for their shop during the week.”

“To the point, Griff.” I don’t need her whole life story.

“Deputy Dumbass thought she was a whore and tried to blackmail her. She’s a virgin. Has been saving herself for Cross since she was sixteen. I don’t think he even knows she exists. Blackmail didn’t work, though, and here I am.”

“How’d the MC know, then?” Doesn’t seem like the girl would be asking for favors if she’s hiding her love for Cross. But he is a perceptive son of a bitch, so he might have found out on his own.

“I called Cross after Tallulah told me what happened. I didn’t give a shit about me, but guys like that fucking deputy will not take no for an answer. Someone needs to protect her.”

“I’m going to be frank with you here, Griff. My lawyer is working to get us out as quickly as he can. My folks think it’s

going to take two days. Those two days could turn to two years if I have to defend you again. Keep your head down and your mouth shut because my girl is missing, and her crazy fucking family likely has something to do with it.” Balling my fists, I bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t go fuck some motherfucker up to vent my frustration.

“I understand.” His words are resigned.

Turning to face him head-on, I tell him, “I won’t let anything happen to you, but it can’t be so obvious that I did the ass-kicking. So if you get in a jam, take your lickings, and I’ll fuck ‘em up later, got it?” *I need to fuck someone up.*

Bea missing is the worst fucking thing that could have happened while I’m in here. And once I’m out, there’s going to be a considerable shift in power within the police department because the sheriff is fucking done for.

Bea

Time has no meaning here. One day bleeds into the next as I lay strapped to the bed. I’m released to eat and go to the bathroom three times a day, and then I’m shackled again.

The worst of it is that whatever they used to knock me out in the supermarket has somehow kick-started my memory, and I’ve spent this entire time recalling the way Nolan would touch me. Kiss me. The way we made love. The look in his eyes when he thought I’d done or said something funny.

He was so patient with me when I was timid, when I got a burst of confidence, and when I was shy. Nolan always made me feel like the most precious thing in his entire world, and

it's all been stolen from us. My family ruined everything before we ever had a chance to become something more. Something incredible.

I have no idea how to get out of this hell I've been locked into. And I don't know if Nolan will ever be able to rescue me.

"Knock, knock." The door to my room opens, and I see Dr. Laura. For once, a friendly face. I've refused to talk to anyone else since arriving. "How are you feeling, Bean?"

My eyes narrow at her use of my full name. She's always called me Bea, and now I think I see a pattern I hadn't before. "Bea," I grind out, my jaw so tense that with one blow, it could shatter like glass.

"Yes, Bea. I'm sorry." She smiles at me as she closes the door and comes to sit on the chair next to the bed. "I was told you didn't want to speak with the facility's psychology team, so I was brought in."

"By whom?" I never told them about her. Which means everything has been orchestrated by my family like I thought.

"Well, your parents mentioned that you finally agreed to being treated here and that you were having a hard time adjusting." Her head tilts curiously, but I glimpse it. In her eyes is the look of a woman playing two sides of the same coin.

"If by agreed, you mean drugged, kidnapped, and forced, then sure, let's go with that."

"You're being a tad dramatic, don't you think?" Dramatic would be to stab her in the knee with the fork I hid at lunch.

"No, I'm being accurate. I was out shopping with Ariel Sutton when I was accosted by a man who proceeded to stab me in the neck with a needle, rendering me unconscious, and

then I was brought here where I've been held against my will for I don't know how many days."

"Sutton?" There's a trace of fright in her tone.

"Yes, I've been seeing her son, Nolan." I didn't realize a name could bring fear to a person.

"The Dark Knight?" I don't know what that means, but I go with it because, clearly, she does.

"He wants to marry me. His father has been kinder to me in the few days I was there than my own father was in a lifetime." Dr. Laura has grown so pale I'd almost think she's seen a ghost.

"Luther." For someone who is ordinarily quite chatty, this woman has been reduced to very few words. "Excuse me." She leaves so quickly that the door doesn't close all the way, and I hear her having a conversation with someone.

"Do you know who that girl is associated with? The things they'll do to this entire facility if they find out you're keeping her here against her will?" Laura sounds terrified.

"What are you talking about?" The doctor who keeps forcing pills down my throat sounds annoyed.

"Luther Sutton is to be her father-in-law. She says she's going to marry Nolan Sutton." I get the sinking feeling that I have no idea who my soon-to-be family really is, and I'm unsure if that's a good thing or bad.

"Shit. Did nobody bother to check who the man was when he took her home?" I don't hear an answer because I think they are walking farther away.

I don't understand why Nolan's name incites fear in them, but I'm half hoping that means they'll let me go. I'm also a bit

scared they'll dispose of me instead. The latter is an option I'd rather not ponder on for too long.

When I hid the fork from my lunch under the mattress, I did so in the hopes that they would see that while I'm not talkative, I also haven't tried to escape when they've unbound me and would allow me to remain free. It hasn't happened, and I'm not sure if it ever will now.

I've considered faking memory loss again so they might have some kind of pity on me, but I'm afraid it won't work, and they'll drug me again. I need a clear head if I'm to try and escape on my own. None of Nolan's family saw when I was taken, so I have no idea if they can figure out who has me. *I* don't even know where I am. All they've said in reference to this place is the "facility". Which in its own right is petrifying.

Flora has wanted to send me away for a long time, but I didn't think my father would allow her to go through with it. I thought, for sure, there was some kind of love he still harbored for me, but with everything happening now, I don't think I can hold onto that hope anymore.

"We need to sterilize her before they come for her, then. If they're going to destroy us, it might as well be for a solid reason." The man's cold voice is raised.

Sterilize? My body runs cold; ice slices through my veins. Pins prick my flesh. My eyes roam down my body to stare at my stomach. Still flat. Still smooth. Maybe carrying Nolan's child. Lord knows that was his plan.

And they want to take that away from me? My only chance to have someone as just mine? To have someone who will love me because I love them so much? I can't risk it.

I have to do something.

Chapter 11

Nolan

Cross and Holden are standing at the exit as Griff and I are released, and I inhale deeply, clapping the kid on the shoulder and saying, “Breathe it in, kid. Nothing’s sweeter.” We spent the last two days fending off assholes because someone decided to put a target on our backs in order to keep us in longer.

I think it’s the sheriff back home; Griff thinks it’s the fucking deputy. I’m willing to bet it could be both. I’ll damn well find out, though, and burn both to the ground.

“Nolan, thanks for looking out for him.” Cross holds out a hand for me, and I shake it.

“He’s a good kid. Seems *they* both are. Look out for them.” My stare penetrates, and he nods, understanding what I’m not saying.

“Ready to go bust some kneecaps?” Holden claps his hands together, and a gleeful smile crosses his face. “There’s a bayou with a gator infestation I think we should check out.”

Translation: A new dumpsite he’s dying to use.

“Let’s do this.” Climbing into his Tahoe, two car seats and a scattering of toys in the back, and I can’t stop the laughter. “Real kill-mobile you got here.”

“Don’t get blood on the interior; Noelle will flip her shit.” His serious face makes me hoot harder.

The drive home only takes an hour, and it’s done in silence as I look through the file Holden and Daniel put together for me on the sheriff. Bank records show he took a huge payoff the day my warrant was issued, which happened to be the same day I brought Bea home.

I don’t believe in coincidences, so I know it’s related. “Have you heard anything from Morris?” The man was supposed to meet me last week, but instead, he and his wife had me locked up, and he avoided the meeting with Bishop. It doesn’t even matter to me anymore if he’s part of this entire conspiracy or not; he’s just as culpable due to his ignorance. He should know what’s happening under his own roof. Especially when it has to do with the vulnerabilities of his daughter.

“He’s been suspiciously silent on all fronts.” Pulling up to the front of our childhood home, I see King, my father, and Atticus standing on the front step under cover of the awning from the rain. We all lived here at one time or another, and while my parents gave us a good home, The Castle is where I find the most comfort.

The dungeon in the basement also holds its own appeal. Especially right now.

“Gentlemen,” I greet as I take the steps up to the door two at a time. “Glad to see you.”

“Good to have you home, son.” Luther drags me in for a back-slapping hug.

Atticus opens the door and squeezes my shoulder in silent support. “We need to talk.” King’s tone sounds ominous as I

notice Bishop, Hendrix, Castiel, and surprisingly, my little sister, Lake, waiting in the den off the foyer.

“Nolan!” she gasps, rushing into my arms. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Me too, sis.” Holding her tight to my chest, I walk her back into the room. “What’s going on?” I ask the room as a whole.

Everyone looks to Lake, who freezes in my embrace. I feel her breathing accelerate, and as I glance down at her, she pales, and I fucking hate it. Hate that whatever has happened to her, she won’t tell me.

Me!

Her big brother. The one who has vowed to protect her with everything I am until Saint finally lays claim to her.

“What’s going on, sis? What do you know?” I try to remain calm as I sit her down on a couch and crouch down in front of her. My patience to have Bea in my arms again is wearing thin.

“I knew Bea’s sisters in high school. They were a couple of years older, and I didn’t even know Bea existed until you brought her home, and I still haven’t met her.” Her voice is barely an octave above a whisper—a sign of her own insecurities and nervousness.

“What about them?”

“They’re cruel, Nolan. Like really cruel.” She pauses, and I don’t believe it’s for dramatic effect. “They went to camp with me.” Sucking in a harsh breath, tears form in her eyes. Nobody fucking knows what happened at that goddamned camp a few years ago, and for a family of men who will do

anything for the women we love, it's been a point of contention for all of us. Especially my father, Damien, and me.

“Please, Lake, please tell me.”

Dad comes to sit next to her now, an arm wrapped across her shoulders.

“They used to talk about smothering their bean plant. We all thought it was an inside joke, but now, I think it was about Bea. They're as bad as their mother, and Nolan, she is a viper. She's ruthless and will stop at nothing to get what she wants, so if she wants Bea out of the picture, that will happen.” Swallowing roughly, her cool, blue gaze darts around the room before settling on me again.

“They used to say they couldn't wait to take their bean plant to the Hamish Plantation. I thought that was a psychological institution, so it never made sense, but then I overheard the parentals talking about Bean Plant Daley, and it clicked. That has to be it, right?” The tears she's held back spring free, sliding down her face, and my heart breaks for my sister all over again.

“Lake, you beautiful genius, I fucking love you.” Gripping either side of her head, I bring her in close to kiss her on the forehead. “You're the best, sis. The fucking best, and as soon as I bring Bea home, you'll meet her. She's going to love you just as much.”

“Just bring her home, Nol. The things they do...they're cruel.”

Nodding, I have one destination in mind.

Hamish Plantation.

They're going to suffer my unleashed wrath before I'm finished with them.

Chapter 12

Bea

Lights are out. The facility lays silent, and a storm wages war outside. I was able to shove the fork I hid days ago in the frame of the bed between the wall and post right where the straps connect. To focus their attention fully on me while I was being tied down again, I began screaming and kicking my legs, making it impossible for them to fasten more than a quick strap around my wrists. Lucky for me, they didn't do them up tight enough.

I discovered today that I'd been here for nearly a week. Strapped to a bed, relying solely on people who wanted to hurt me for any type of care. I haven't showered since that first day, and to say I feel disgusting is an understatement. But that's not the worst of it.

I'm barely eating at this point because I always feel so sick to my stomach. I'm weak and sense I'm running out of time because I overheard the doctor telling Laura that they scheduled my sanitization for the day after tomorrow.

Sanitization.

As if I'm dirty. As if the idea of me having babies is so disgusting. I want them. I didn't think I did, but then I met Nolan, and I want as many as he'll give me.

If he still wants me.

I doubt he does. All this trouble for a girl he barely knows. I got him arrested for goodness sake. He probably hates me.

Which is why I have to rely on myself.

Hence, the stupid fork and the theatrics today.

Pulling on the wrist that's looser, it takes a few minutes and some lip-biting, but I'm finally able to free my hand. It hurts like hell from the pressure of yanking, but I manage to unbuckle the opposite hand before working on my feet.

One of the first things I noticed after I began to hatch my plan was that there were no cameras in the rooms. I suspect it's so they can hide the abuse I've heard goes on here, but I'm glad for it. Grabbing the fork from its hiding place, I look out the window. I don't know if I'm in the front, back, or side of the building, but I'm only three stories up. Which means the fall is going to hurt, possibly break something, but I won't die. I hope. I don't even know if the window will open. Thankfully, there aren't any bars covering my escape, or I'd be royally screwed.

Using the fork to chisel along the seal of the window from where they painted it shut, I keep my escape as quiet as possible, but I'm beginning to sweat the more time that goes by. I'm afraid I might have to break the window, then I feel it budge.

Jamming my lips together so I don't squeal my excitement, I give one final shove, and it opens. Leaning out, I become soaked from the rain, but I think I'm on the side of the building because I don't see anything out here but darkness.

Going back to the rolling table in the room with a pair of folded pants and socks sitting on top, I slip them on. They won't do much good to protect me, but it's better than running

around with the flimsy nightgown. Next, I grab the sheets off the bed and tie them together. If I can just make them long enough to shorten the drop a little, that's all I need.

Affixing one end to the bars holding the window open, I drop the sheet groundward. I have no idea if anyone on the floors below can see what I'm about to do or what they'll do if they can, but I can't care about that. Not right now. I need to get out of here.

There's something in my gut screaming at me to leave, and I have to listen to it. I must. If I don't, the consequences could be dire. I've been feeling it for days now.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter and climb up on the windowsill. Throwing my legs over the side, I turn to grab the sheet and slowly reel down, but with each movement, I feel the flimsy bar bending. It's only a matter of time before it'll break under my weight.

Moving faster, I grit my teeth and stifle the scream I want to release when I feel the bar give a little more. At the top of the window below my room, I say a quick prayer that whoever is in there doesn't care about me.

Lowering farther, I notice a man sitting on his bed, playing cards when he turns to see me. At first, he's shocked, but I keep moving; I'm not even going to attempt to silence him. I barely catch him get up and come over before he pounds once on the window, and it startles me enough that I almost lose my grip.

Grinning, he gives me a thumbs up and keeps watching until I reach the ground. Tugging the sheet until it breaks the bar, I don't want to leave any evidence of what I'm doing behind. The window slams shut, and the sheet and bar fall.

Grabbing them both up in a bundle, I wave to the man and make a run for the trees I now see in the distance.

A swift glance around shows no one has been alerted to my escape yet, which spurs me on to run faster. As soon as I hit the tree line, I shove the sheet and bar inside a hollowed-out trunk and throw some loose foliage on top of it so it won't be noticed.

I'm already soaked from the rain and probably partly from the exertion, but I don't care. I must keep going. I don't know where I am or how close a road is, so I hug the tree line as tight as possible and run along the property's edge. My legs burn, my lungs are on fire, and when I finally hear cars from the road, an extra burst of speed propels me faster until I run smack into a barred fence.

Knocked to the ground, my head stings where I hit the wrought iron bars. "Crap, crap, crap." I knew it was too easy. Turning around, I recognize the building in the distance, lights illuminating the property, and I feel defeated.

Sliding to the ground, I lean against the bars and fold my knees up to my chest, dropping my head. I take a minute for a pity party. I just need a minute.

One minute.

But I don't have it.

Nolan

Bursting through the doors of Hamish Plantation with Holden, Bishop, Hendrix, Saint, and Easton flanking me, I almost feel bad for the lady sitting behind the reception desk. At our

abrupt entry, her head whips up, and I'm sure what she sees is from a nightmare.

We're soaked to the bone, ready to commit mass amounts of violence, and each of us holds a weapon in a hand or two. Holden and I stop at the desk. "Evening, ma'am." Saint goes left, Easton goes right, and Bishop and Hendrix go straight. "I'm looking for a girl."

"We're closed to visitors for the evening. All residents are in bed for the night." She swallows, and a bead of sweat pops out on her forehead.

"Don't much care. The girl I'm looking for is Bean Daley. She'd have been brought here a few days ago. Likely drugged on arrival. Probably checked in by her parents." Parents who are now in the hands of the Petrov-Corelli twins. I almost feel bad. *Almost.*

"I can't help you." The words squeak out like she forced them past her now-chapped lips.

Knocking my knuckles on the desk, I respond, "Try again," my voice less cordial and more deliberately deadly.

"I'm sorry," she chokes out.

"Not yet," Holden tells her, "but you will be."

Tears hover on her eyelids before spilling over. "What's your name?" I ask her. We're generally not in the business of hurting women, but if this one won't help me in my quest to find Bea, all bets are off, and I won't suffer a moment of guilt for it.

"C-c-c-c-indy Hamlin."

"Got any family, Cindy? Kids, husband, parents, siblings?" She nods. "I will end them quicker than I do you."

Her face contorts before the tears start spilling as heavily as the rain. “You would hurt children?” She’s horrified.

I roll my eyes. “My girl is pregnant, so I suppose the same could be said for you.” I don’t know if it’s true, but I also don’t know it’s not. “Bea is mine. And I take care of what’s mine, no matter the cost and whom I have to ruin in order to get it. Understand?”

I’m unsure what changes for her, but she agrees and begins typing away on her computer. “There isn’t a Bean Daley in the system, but sometimes, they just get numbered.” Her gulp is audible.

“And?” I roll my hand, my patience quickly fading.

“Dr. Crosby admitted one female patient this week.” She scrolls some more. “Third floor.” I’m already on my way to the stairwell. “Room 318!” she calls after us.

“Get the hell out of here, Cindy. You don’t want to be around when I’m done with this place.” It’s the only warning I’m going to give the woman. “Holden, call someone to come collect these patients. I’m sure some don’t deserve to be here, though some likely do.” If they’ve taken Bea hostage, there’s no telling how many others are in the same situation.

“Who the fuck do I call?” he mutters as he pulls out his phone.

“Doesn’t King know the governor?” I’m sure there are many others, too.

“Good call.”

I’ve already texted the guys to round up all the doctors and nurses in this place and lock them up somewhere secure. I need to know who tended to Bea before deciding who’s sticking around for the incineration.

“Dad’s on it,” Holden says as we exit the stairwell on the third floor.

“302.” I read the number on the door. “Other end.” They stuck her in a corner room. Rushing to the end of the hall, I stop dead when I see her number. A chart is in a display case on the wall, and I pull it out to take a fast glance. “Psychosis, mentally unstable, a danger to others. Fucking assholes.” Holden points to something farther down the page, and I see red. “Sterilization approved.”

I’ve seen enough. Shoving the folder into my back pocket, I lift a booted foot and kick the door open. The frame splinters, and the knob lodges into the wall on the other side. Stepping in, I don’t find Bea anywhere.

“Where the fuck is she?” There’s nowhere for her to hide in here.

“Is that window open?” Holden asks, and we both stride over.

Shoving on it, I see the bar holding it open has been broken off, and there are scratch marks along the windowsill. Looking down, I don’t see her mangled body, but I notice woods a few hundred yards away and ripped fabric on the broken metal.

“She fucking jumped,” I hiss, both pissed and proud of her. “There’s a window below. Send someone there; see if anyone is in the room and if they saw her. I’m heading to those woods.”

“On it.” We leave, zooming down the stairs. Holden exits on the second floor. “I’ll call you,” he says.

I don’t respond. All I want is to get outside and to where Bea is. She’s probably freezing cold, hurt, and scared as hell.

Fuck. I pause as I'm about to exit the stairs. What the hell am I going to do if she still doesn't remember me? I hadn't even thought about that before.

"Doesn't matter." I shake my head and continue on, searching for the nearest exit on that side of the building. I stop when I recognize Easton with a doctor. "Who's that?" I shout down the hall.

"Dr. Crosby." He walks the man towards me. "Says he hasn't a clue who we're looking for. I think he's lying." *That's who Cindy said checked Bea in.*

"Bea is going to be my wife," I tell him, keeping my tone calm. "She's pregnant with my child." His face pales. As soon as they're close enough to reach, my hands whip out and grip his chin and the back of his head. "You were going to kill my child."

With one hard twist, his neck snaps, and I let him drop to the floor. My only regret is not having the time to make him suffer properly.

"I guess I was right then." Easton shrugs, already forgetting the man. "Where we headed?" He claps his hands together, rubbing them furiously.

"The woods. She jumped from her third-story window. Holden's seeing if someone witnessed which way she went."

"After you." We push through the door into the rainy night, ignoring the elements in search of Bea. Sprinting to the woods, I almost immediately spot white popping out of a tree. Digging the object out, I find two sheets tied together and the broken piece of bar. "Check this out!" Easton calls over a loud clap of thunder.

Footprints.

Small. Bare.

“That’s her.” I’d bet my life on it.

Following behind Easton since he’s tracking her, I grab my phone when it rings. “Yeah?”

“Along the property line. The guy said he saw her hide her shit in a tree and then run along the perimeter. There’s a road that way, but he says it’s fenced.”

“Thanks, Holden.” Hanging up, I tell East, “Let’s go. There’s a road up ahead. She could be there.” Neither of us hesitates to break into a run, and after a few minutes, I hear the cars on the nearby road. But when we get closer, what I see drains the blood from my veins.

Bea

“Please don’t do this.” I had been too weak to fight her off. Frozen from the elements, my limbs wouldn’t work the way I demanded them to.

The rope around my neck tightens as I’m hoisted higher and higher until just the tips of my toes touch the ground. “I have no choice. If word gets out, we’re ruined.” *I don’t care.* I want to scream it, but the air gets sucked from my lungs.

She caught me from the other side of the fence while I took a moment to wallow in my pity. I didn’t hear her coming, nor did I have a chance to fight her off. As soon as my head lifted, she had the rope around my neck, and the next thing I knew, she was attempting to hang me.

“It has to be suicide,” she grits out as she pulls harder.

Planting my feet on the bottom of the fence, I grab the rope above my head and yank with all my might. I don't want to die. I haven't even lived yet. This can't be the end for me.

“Bea!” At first, I imagine I hear Nolan's voice. He can't be here. He doesn't even know where I am. Nobody does. But then I hear it again. Louder. “BEA!”

I look up this time, and there he is, every bit the dark knight they kept referring to him as. I've never seen him so enraged, and with a gun in one hand and knife in the other, he looks like an avenging knight.

“Nolan!” I attempt to call his name, but my throat is hoarse, and it hurts. I needn't worry, however, because the man with him makes one gigantic leap, and he's climbing up and over the fence to land on the ground next to *her* while Nolan catches me as the tension from the rope gives out.

I collapse in his arms, and he drops to his knees with me. The cool steel of the blade as it cuts the rope around my neck eases me. “What the fuck happened,” he hisses.

“I knew you'd come.” I think I say it out loud, but my throat feels funny, and I know my voice is raspy. With the ringing in my ears, everything feels off. My body grows weightless, and my mind is light.

Strong fingers cup my jaw, lifting my head as Nolan gazes down at me. The fear and anger swirling in his gorgeous orbs are addicting. “Talk to me, little girl.”

My mouth opens, but I don't think anything comes out. Scooping me up in his arms, he starts talking to the man who came with him, and I turn my head to see he's got Dr. Laura on the ground face first with a knee in her back.

A moment of guilt hits me because she was the only person I trusted for the longest time—years. I told her everything. I thought she had my best interest at heart. The betrayal slices so deep I'm surprised there isn't blood pouring out of my chest from how far she dug her knife in and twisted it.

We're moving now, and I close my eyes as I cuddle into the warmth of Nolan's body. Despite the rain and how I'm soaked to the bone from it, I find comfort in his body heat. In the way he cradles me to his chest and in the way he can't stop kissing my temple.

Lulled into a state of comfort, I'm blinded by light and startled awake as I feel him climbing steps. Opening my eyes, I recognize the front doors of the facility and begin to struggle, wiggling so violently to be let go that I'm flipped around.

"No," I hiss. "No, I won't go back. You can't make me go back!" I scream and climb to my feet, sprinting down the stairs and towards the front gate. To freedom.

Until I'm scooped up from behind and spun around, coming face to face with Nolan. "You're here," I whisper, and he frowns.

Dropping me to my feet, he brushes the wet hair off my face. "Bea." The word comes out soft, sympathetic. "What just happened?"

My brows pucker as my eyes dart from his handsome face to the facility and back again, then slide towards the woods and the fence lining the property. Fingers at my throat, I feel the abrasions from the rope.

"I—" My mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

Cupping my face in both of his palms, Nolan captures my mouth in a furious kiss. A kiss meant to soothe. A kiss meant to bring me back to life.

“I forgot, and I remembered all at once,” I finally murmur against his lips.

Gripping the backs of my thighs, he picks me up again. My legs wrap around his waist, and my arms go around his neck as he explains what’s going to happen.

“You’re safe, Bea. You always will be with me.” I know that. I hug him tighter. “We’re going inside so you can get some dry clothes on. The police are on their way with medical personnel to shut this shithole down, and then I’m taking you home where the family doctor can look you over and tell me you’re okay.”

My entire body clenches as we approach the building again. I’d rather stay outside and freeze than go back in there. But I trust Nolan, despite the betrayal I’ve suffered since he’s been gone. I know he’d never hurt me.

Chapter 13

Nolan

It's been a couple of days since I rescued Bea...well, she rescued herself at first. She was given a moderately clean bill of health. Just some abrasions on her wrists from the restraints used on her for nearly a week and on her neck from the woman who tried to murder her when Easton and I came upon them. She was dehydrated, starving, and had sprained her ankle from the fall out of her room window. But, otherwise, her body will recover fine.

It's her mind I'm worried about. Falling asleep has become a chore. She's terrified of the nightmares that plague her and even more worried she's going to wake up without her memory. She refuses to take a sedative—not that I blame her.

I enter the dungeon in the basement of the castle we all grew up in. Bea is now resting in my old room with Lake and my mom. Hadley and Aria were by earlier, and even Scotty had FaceTimed to meet the woman who stole my heart.

Lake and Bea bonded over their love of drawing and sketching, and I think they're working on something together now while Mom knits, watching over them.

“Son.” Dad has been standing watch over Morris, Flora, the wicked stepsisters, and Dr. fucking Laura. I don't know who angers me the most.

“Whoever can give me the truth can leave.” They’ve all been locked down here for a few days now. Nothing to eat, drink, and nowhere to go to the bathroom but on themselves. It smells like a pig pen in here.

“Perhaps you should explain to our guests what truth you’re looking for,” Aunt Lilith proffers, entering the room with King behind her. Of all the women in my family, Lilith’s thirst for blood is the only one who rivals any of the men.

“Whose idea was it to lock Bea up like a fucking animal?” I clarify. *Easy enough.*

Morris’ head hangs in shame.

Flora’s face turns red with her anger.

Dr. Laura is belligerent.

And the girls. The sisters don’t even acknowledge anyone in the room.

“Last chance,” I tell them. “It’s the only get-out-of-jail-free card I’ll be giving out.”

The door behind me opens, and I inwardly groan. I’d know her scent anywhere. Green apples and peppermint. I don’t know how the fuck she does it, but I’m addicted.

“Nolan?” Spinning at her questioning tone, I catch the fear in her eyes as she stares around the room. To someone not used to this kind of brutality, it’s likely nightmarish.

“Little girl.” Pulling her into my embrace, I hold one hand on the small of her back, and the other cups her head as her hands land on my chest. The bandages on her raw wrists make me fucking crazy with the need to kill someone. “What are you doing out of bed?” I see my mom right behind her. She

doesn't come here often, but I know what she did all those years ago to the man who spent a lifetime torturing her.

"I had to know, too." Her eyes shift to where her family is chained to a brick wall. "I had to know why they hate me so much that they'd allow that to happen." Her tear-filled eyes meet mine. "I never did anything to them."

"Of course you didn't, sweetheart." Mom slides in to soothe her, rubbing circles on her back as Bea rests her head on my chest.

"Last chance. The more tears she sheds, the angrier I'll be," I warn without looking at them.

"The good doctor has something to say," Dad comments, scowling in her direction.

"Get on with it," I bark out as Bea's dainty hands circle around my waist, fisting the back of my shirt.

"They, uh, they hired me to keep an eye on her, to fish out whether or not Bea—"

"Bea," I snap. She fucking hates that other name.

"Right, sorry. They wanted to know if Bea had caught on to their plans," she finishes, and I don't believe her for a second. I already know everything.

"Ten years," Bea mutters. "Ten years, she was my therapist."

"You're lying, Dr. Laura," I accuse, and before anyone can say or do anything, Lilith strides over to the woman, brandishing a filet knife. King comes forward with a pair of tongs. He tilts Laura's head back and pulls her tongue out while Lil cuts it out. Making an example of her.

Her cries are muted by the bleeding, and I feel no remorse for the woman. She's in a hell of her own making.

"Lilith, my queen, why don't you and Ariel take dear Bea upstairs for some refreshing tea? Her strength is waning." King kisses his wife, as Luther does his, and they both try to guide Bea out of my arms.

"She called you the Dark Knight, Nolan." Bea stares up at me. "What does that mean?"

The sisters are crying not-so-quietly from their chains while the stepmother stares horrified at Laura's tongue on the floor at her knees. Morris still won't look up at anyone, and it curls the suspicion in my gut.

"It means I'm not a good man, Bea. I don't do very many legal things, and late at night, when no one suspects it, I end those who betray me. Us." I don't blink as she processes my words. This could be the end for us, and I wouldn't blame her, but I don't think I'd let her go, either.

Nodding her head, Bea gives one last look at her family before saying, "I hope it was worth it." She then allows Lilith and Ariel to guide her upstairs.

The door closing behind them is like the final nail in her family's coffin. Whether any of them tell me the truth now doesn't matter; they're all going to die. A moment, a very fleeting moment, of guilt pangs in my chest as I stare at the women. I don't usually make it a habit of killing females, but the things Lake told me these girls bragged about doing to Bea, I can't let that go.

A beeping phone breaks the silence of the room, startling the people I stare down, and their chains rattle. If I didn't need Bea to move on with her life so quickly, I'd leave them down

here to die of starvation and dehydration. There doesn't seem to be a much worse death than that.

Pulling out my phone, I look down to find a message from Holden. He was on a very special mission today, and I can't wait for the dark cover of night.

Holden: I'll meet you at midnight.

A simple message. Could mean a thousand things. In this case, it's the promise of death for the corrupt fucking sheriff. Hypocritical, sure, given how many people in the department we've paid off. But they know better than to cross us. And this time, it was for the benefit of hurting the woman I love. Nobody is safe from my wrath.

I grab a stool from the corner, and Dad hands me a pair of pliers as I sit in front of Morris. "This can go one of a few ways, ladies." I slide my sadistic gaze towards them. "You can tell me what I want to know now, and everyone's death will be swift. You can watch me torture old Morris here and, eventually, tell me what I want; then, I'll just continue the torture down the line. Or...nobody tells me anything, but everyone gets tortured, anyways."

Silence meets my ultimatum. It's shocking, to be honest. I've met weaker men before.

"Have it your way, then." King unhooks Morris' hand, and I use the pliers to begin tearing his fingernails out. His screams ring out through the room, bouncing off the walls, before one of the sisters finally cracks.

"Wait, please, stop." I don't know which one she is, but I move over to sit in front of her, waiting to hear what she has to say.

“Well...”

Her eyes cut to the mother before focusing on me. “Her. Everything was her idea. She made threats to all of us if we ever told anyone. She’s hated Bea since the day Dad brought her home. She’s always wanted to get rid of her.”

I’m not surprised by this. I verify, “Hamish Plantation, sterilization, treating her like crap, all Flora’s idea?”

“Yes.”

“Did Morris ever try to stop her? Protest in any way?”

She shakes her head. “She guilted him. All the time. She would rub it in his face that she forgave him and that he needed to do whatever it took to make her happy.” I don’t see an ounce of shame on the mother’s face.

“And the two of you? You sat back and watched? Did you try and stop it?” That answer is reflected in her eyes.

“They thrilled in it...hurting Bea,” Flora spits out.

“What about Lake Sutton?” I sense the tension emanating from my father at the mention of my sister.

“Who?” the other sister asks.

“Couple years ago, summer camp. Blonde, pretty, shy but friendly.” The more I describe her, the more they seem to remember as they share a look. “I know what you did, or rather, didn’t do.” I’m only guessing at this, but from the way Lake spoke about them, I know they were part of what happened to her.

“We should have stopped that.” The girl in front of me hangs her head. My father’s rage becomes uncontrollable as he shoots forward, grabs her head, and slits her throat so viciously he nearly decapitates her.

Blood spurts out all over me, the women scream, Morris passes out, and Dad slams out of the room. My father has been a lot of things in my life. Ruthless, aloof, calculated; he's a cold-blooded killer. But not once have I ever seen him murder anyone out of emotion.

Lifting a finger to my mouth, I scoot my stool over and shush the other two. Gripping the remaining sister's face, I lift her head so I can see her eyes. "Does your mother know what you two did to my sister?"

She looks to her mother before ratting her out as tears stream down her face. "You won't get away with this," Flora grits out, spitting at me.

Caked in blood, I stand up, reach for the gun in King's waistband, turn back around, and pull the trigger twice. Morris and Dr. Laura hang lifelessly from their chains with a bullet hole in the center of their heads.

"I suggest—" accepting the towel from King, I wipe the blood off my face—"you tell my father everything about Lake's assault. Your deaths will be swifter."

Finished with them, I leave the room, strip down to my boxers, and head up to my old room to shower before I go in search of Bea and spend as much time before I meet up with Holden, buried inside her welcoming body.

Bea

Lilith and Ariel talk around me, but I feel like I'm trying to reach the end of a tunnel, except I'm not moving any closer.

My mind just swims with everything I've been learning. About Nolan, my family, myself.

"It's kind of overwhelming, isn't it?" Lake sits next to me as her mom and aunt bustle around the kitchen, making something or other. "They like to cook when there's trouble in the house," she explains.

"I'm not allowed to cook," I say absently. "Everyone is always afraid I will lose my memory and burn the house down." I feel three sets of eyes on me and give them an "oh well" look.

"Your family, that's not how it should have been for you, Bea," Ariel says, stretching across the counter to hold my hand. "That's not how most families are."

"I know." But I don't, really. I only know what I've experienced.

"We're your family now." Lake lifts a hand to wrap across my shoulders and lays her head on me. From the look on Ariel's face, I get the feeling this isn't something Lake ordinarily does. I can feel the hurt in the girl. In the way she watches people around the house. The way she moves. Especially in the way she's been trying to connect with me all day.

Lake has suffered.

She's a kindred spirit, and I hate that for her so much.

"Excuse us," Ariel whispers, pulling a confused Lilith from the room.

I wait a few minutes, thinking they'll come back, but when they don't, I ask Lake bluntly, "What happened to you?"

Startled, her hold on me tightens, and I feel bad for putting her on the spot, but I won't take it back. From the things I keep hearing around the house and the way Nolan spoke of his sister earlier, I don't think anyone has a clue what she's endured.

"I won't judge, you know. and I won't tell another soul unless you ask me to." Her tear-filled face lifts to stare at me. Her wide blue eyes exhibit a need to unburden herself. "Not even Nolan," I promise her.

"I knew your sisters...before." That surprises me. "We went to the same private school, though they were some years ahead. But they knew who I was, who my family was." I nod; I'm getting a pretty good idea about who the family is now, as well.

"I used to go to summer camps. Every year, it was something I looked forward to. Sometimes, I would get to go to a couple of different ones a summer. A few years ago, I went to a new one." She turns to face the counter we're sitting at, staring at the wall above the stove.

Remaining silent, I let her speak at her own pace. "It was fun at first. There were so many new people to meet. New games. New friend groups and activities." Crossing her arms on the counter, she lays her head down and turns her face towards me. "I just wanted to be liked."

Matching her action, I stare straight at Lake when I say, "I like you. You're the best friend I've ever had, and I've only known you a day." Whatever hurt she's suffered, Lake is one of the best people I know.

"Thank you." She sniffles. "Your sisters, they...they were cruel. I don't understand why I was targeted, but they paid a group of boys to do things to me. Things I can't talk about.

They ruined me. The demons that haunt me are never going away, and I can never recover what they took from me. I have to learn to live with it, and I'm terrified I'll be alone forever."

Pulling her into my arms, I sense her heartbreak and wish I could ease some of it. Help in some way. Ariel pops in and rushes to Lake's side. Mouthing a thank you to me, she rushes the crying girl out of the room while Lilith returns to cooking.

"She hasn't spoken before about what went on then. What you did just now, whatever she told you, whatever you did for her, thank you." I hear the tears in Lilith's voice.

It appears this family has been through absolute hell, and they're all trying to navigate their way around the agony they each feel.

"Bea." Nolan stands in the entryway, hair wet from a shower, shirtless, and wearing loose shorts. His heated gaze has me rising to my feet.

"See you later." Lilith winks as Nolan pulls me out of the kitchen.

Dropping down, he presses a shoulder into my stomach and lifts me over his shoulder. "Oh crap!" I laugh, closing my eyes as he rushes up the stairs, slamming the door shut behind us and putting me on my feet.

"Strip" is his only instruction. This isn't like the first time we were intimate or the second or third. There's an intensity to Nolan that I've never seen, and I find myself yearning for more of it.

Nipping my lip, I turn my back on Nolan. When I hear him growl, a mischievous smile spreads across my face. "Don't turn your back on me, little girl." His warning is menacing.

“I would never.” I drop the shorts and panties I’m wearing. Stepping out of them, I lift one knee to rest on the bed.

“You’re playing with fire, Bea.” I can tell he’s gotten closer. I practically feel his harsh breathing down my neck, but he doesn’t touch me. Not yet.

Crossing my arms, I grab the hem of my shirt, pulling it up and over my head before dropping it on the floor. “Little girl.” There’s a hitch in his breath I haven’t detected before.

Leaning down, I crawl forward a few feet before bending over to place my chest and head against the mattress with my hips in the air and hold my wrists at the small of my back while spreading my knees apart.

“Fuck,” he mutters, and the rustle of fabric sinks in as he drops his shorts before I feel the bed dipping as he climbs on behind me. “Are you submitting to me, Bea?” Desire permeates his tone.

Meeting his stare from behind, I swallow at the look in his eyes before tormenting him with, “Yes, Daddy.”

“You’re fucking decadent, little girl. A gift I surely don’t deserve, but I’m never giving you back. You understand me?” I nod as I lick my lips, eager to know what he wants to do with my submission.

“Good.” His hands cup my ass cheeks, massaging and squeezing as he shifts closer, pressing his engorged length between my legs. Rubbing it along my soaked pussy. It blows my mind that Nolan can take me away from the world with a look, a touch, a simple compliment. He makes me forget all the abysmal things that have transpired.

“Nice and easy now, little love.” With one hand on my wrists over my back and the other guiding himself to my

entrance, I moan at the invasion.

He's enormous and fills me up deliciously, ensuring no nerve-ending is left untouched. I love it, despite the stretch and burn. Oh so slowly, too slowly, his hips sway back and forth.

In and out.

Agonizing torture.

Without mercy.

Nolan teases me to the point of insanity.

"Please, Daddy, please don't tease me." His divine chuckle vibrates against my back as he leans over, kissing along the blades of my shoulders.

Grasping each of my wrists, he drags my arms up and over my head, covering my entire body with his commanding frame and leisurely rocks in and out of my body. His head presses into the sheet next to mine as we ride this wave together.

Grinding, grunting, groaning, we catch our breath only to lose it a second later. "So fucking good like this," he grumbles in my ear, kissing my cheek.

"Torturous," I correct him as he digs deep, hitting a sensitive spot inside me.

Releasing one of my hands, he moves *his* down my body and around the front to play with my clit. I feel so swollen around him already, so when he touches me, even just the slightest, my body rockets into the stars, and I'm delirious with pleasure.

I shake and shiver as he mollifies me, running his hands along my skin before I feel two fingers pushing through my back entrance. "Nolan?" My frightened question has him smacking my ass as he scissors those fingers around.

Stretching me. Readyng me for something so insanely intimate I never even thought of it.

“You submitted, Bea. You gave me this, little girl.” His words are possessive, almost like he’s no longer in control of himself.

When I feel his wet cockhead pushing into the tight rings, I do my best to relax into his hold, wanting this as much as he does. “Oh fuck, yeah, such a good little girl.” I am so blind with lust I hadn’t realized how easily he slipped right in.

“It burns,” I whisper. “I like it.”

“I knew you would.” I feel his lips on my spine as he begins thrusting, penetrating my body to my very soul. He’s not nearly as gentle as he was before, and soon, I’m screaming again as I feel him stiffening behind me, unloading inside of me, and groaning out his own pleasure.

Collapsing over my back, I love his weight on top of me. “Marry me, Bea. Be my wife, my everything.”

It doesn’t sound like a question, but I respond, *yes*, anyways.

Nolan

“Let’s make this fucking quick. I just fucked Bea into a coma and convinced her to marry me. I’d rather be buried in her soft cunt than out here dealing with a man who helped in trying to ruin us both.” Glaring at the sheriff hanging upside down over gator-infested waters, my hatred for him grows.

“That was quick,” Holden smirks.

“What?” I poke the sheriff with a fallen branch on the dock to wake his dumb ass up.

“Convincing her to marry you. Been together for what, like two weeks? Spent a total of four days together, and already, you’re getting married. It was quick.” He stands to the side, arms crossed, eyes glued to the sheriff, now pretending to be unconscious.

“You proposed and got married on the same day,” I point out.

His head lifts with a sly grin as he remembers that day. I remember the black eye and bloody nose after I kissed Noelle. “Don’t even fucking think about it,” I point the stick at him.

Raising his hands, Holden laughs while shaking his head. “Noelle would likely kill me. Besides, East, Bish, and Hen aren’t shackled down. I’d watch out for them.” Winking, he leans down a few inches from the sheriff’s face, poking his cheek with a finger. “We know you’re awake, man. Give it up.”

His eyes pop open, and he glares at Holden before his gaze shifts to me and down to the water below. “You can’t do this.” He’s trying to be brave, but there’s a tremor of fear in his tone.

“Except that, I can, and I am.” And it gives me great fucking pleasure. Killing the man who sought to bring me to my knees will be my greatest achievement. Well, second to claiming Bea and creating a life with her.

“You’ll never get away with killing a sheriff, Sutton. You know that.” I bark out a harsh laugh.

“Do you think we haven’t before?” Holden challenges, and I see the wheels turning in the unfortunate man’s eyes when realization dawns.

“Sheriff Grey.” Standing next to Holden, we share a look and a sick grin. Dwayne Grey was our first kill together.

“We found him beating the shit out of his wife and child.” The Empire helped them both get away. New life, new identities, but Grey wouldn’t give up. He harassed the woman’s family. Eventually, the father wound up having a heart attack after one of Grey’s interrogations. Now, they’re free, living happily on the West Coast.

“You killed him,” he hisses; we chuckle.

“Just like we’re going to do to you.” Whipping the knife out of my back sheath, I bury it into his gut. His screams echo around the marsh, disrupting animals as they sleep. Blood drips into the water below, causing a ripple effect as a set of eyes rises to the surface.

Pulling the blade out of the guy’s flesh, I wipe the blood off on his pants. Additional glowing orbs pop up as more blood slides into the murky water.

“You want to draw this out, Nol, or be done and home to your girl? I, for one, have a woman waiting on me at home, and I’d like to get back to her before the boy wakes up.” Anticipation clouds Holden’s words. I can only imagine how that goes with them.

Glancing at the knife in my hand, I raise my arm and cut through the rope, watching as the cop screams for the two seconds before he hits the water. His insipid cries slowly die as he’s torn to shreds. Bursts of blood and shredded clothing float to the surface, and after a few minutes, there’s nothing left of the man.

“That was...”

“Satisfying,” I finish for Holden. I know he normally spends more time with his victims, torturing them the way they’ve tortured others. But this time, I just wanted it over with. Needed the job done.

What I have at home waiting for me is worth more than any revenge. Bea is free, and she wants to be my wife. Has secretly confessed that she hopes she’s pregnant with my child even though she’s terrified that she’ll forget again. However, I plan to spend the rest of my life showing her that even if she does, we’ll be there for her. Loving her. Protecting her. Proving that she’s worth more than any amount of money in the world.

Epilogue

Bea

Nine months later.

“**B**reathe, little girl. Nice and slow.” The deep cadence of his voice lulls me into a sense of profound safety. No matter how tumultuous our last few months have been, Nolan was the one constant I could always count on.

“I am,” I whine. “It isn’t working.” Gritting my teeth, my jaw locked and tense, hands squeezing the sides of the garden tub to the point of pain, I feel like my body might explode.

“You can do this.” His confidence nearly shatters me.

“Do you want to get out?” Lake asks. She’d been so shocked when I asked her to be with me for the water birth that she cried for two days straight, saying no one had ever trusted her like that.

“I’m okay,” I hiss through another contraction as the doctor finishes her exam.

“It’s time, Bea. On the next one, you’re going to push.” Her smile is encouraging, but I want to collapse and weep with frustration.

Everyone is here. I was informed I could have whomever I wanted in the room when I gave birth since we’re in the home Luther and Ariel had built after they moved out of The Castle.

They stand ready at the baby warmer they ensured would be here.

Damien waits outside, claiming he doesn't need to see his sister-in-law's girly parts. Nolan holds me up from behind, and Lake is at my side. There are two doctors and three nurses here as well. Luther wanted to ensure everything would go smoothly for me.

"It's coming," I groan, panting and leaning my head back against Nolan's shoulder.

He whispers in my ear so no one else can hear, "Be a good girl for Daddy and do what the doctor says. Push, baby." I wail through the contraction as the doctor's hands work between my legs.

"That was a good one, Bea. Bear down again in the next one." Her smile is encouraging.

The contraction hits, I scream, everyone says something positive, telling me how great I'm doing, and then finally, finally, there's an intense pop of relief, and the baby is lifted out of the water. We opted to keep the sex a surprise.

"A beautiful little girl," the doctor says, holding her up for us to see before handing her off to the midwife so she can take her to the warmer and clean her up.

"A girl," I whisper, amazed. I was almost positive it was a boy.

"Fuck me," Nolan groans from behind. "I'm so fucked." Luther laughs, glancing at his own daughter with love in his eyes and the lingering worry.

"Oh, Bea, Nolan, she's absolutely beautiful," Ariel croons over top of our daughter as she gets checked out. "Just perfect."

“Time to get you out of here,” my physician says, motioning at Nolan, who scoops me up from the water and carries me over to the bed. A waterproof pad lays under the soft sheets to prevent any damage. Two labor nurses come over to remove my shirt and help me dry off while also assisting in my cleanup.

After I’m redressed, Nolan and Lake help me into the bed, where pillows are propped up, and they slide a blanket over my legs and place the nursing pillow at my side. Little cries come from our girl as Ariel cradles her in her arms to bring her over to us.

Luther turns around to help straighten up the tub while one of the nurses shows me how to get the baby to latch onto a breast. The sense of fulfillment I feel when Nolan wraps one arm behind my head and the other under our daughter’s back is overwhelming, and tears spill down my face.

“Hey, none of that now. You were both perfect. You did amazing.” It freaks him out when I cry, but I can’t help it.

“Knock, knock.” Damien’s head pokes through the door. “Can I come in yet?”

“Yes,” everyone seems to say at once.

“Holy shit.” He stops dead in his tracks at the side of the bed, no longer worried about seeing any part of me as he sits next to my hip, stroking a finger along our infant’s cheek. “You made a human.” For once, he’s not trying to play around; he’s captivated.

Over the last several months, I’ve grown closer to Lake, Damien, and their parents than I had with my own family in my twenty years with them. They’re not just Nolan’s family, they’re mine, and I appreciate and love them every day.

“You did good, Bean Plant; you did good.” Nolan growls at his brother, knowing I despise the name, but Damien only uses it with endearing love. He’s been calling me that since we discovered I was pregnant because I was growing an entire person inside me. When he explained that, it seemed fitting; it still does.

“Do we have a name?” the doctor asks as she fills out the birth certificate.

Sharing a look, Nolan and I say together, “Ariella.”

“Oh!” Ariel’s hands cover her mouth. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Reaching out a hand for his mom, Nolan tells her, “We know, but Bea wanted to honor one of you because you’ve been so welcoming to her. You treat her like she’s your own, and you love her in a way that only a parent can. You’ve given her what her family wouldn’t, and this was the perfect way to show her appreciation.”

Tears shine in his mother’s eyes as Luther kisses the top of her head. “Well, I’m beyond flattered, and I’m so happy for you both. Now, everyone out. They need some bonding time. Visitors can come back later.”

Like the leader she is, Ariel pushes everyone out of the room before kissing her namesake on the back of the head and then me on the cheek before whispering, “Thank you for this amazing gift,” and walking out of the room.

“She was right.” Nolan flashes his teeth with a proud grin. “You’ve given us an amazing gift.” Pulling us closer, Ariella has fallen asleep, so he takes her from my arms and slowly pats her back as she lays across his shoulder until she burps.

Reaching up for a kiss, our lips meet, and as always, I feel like I could melt in his arms. “No, Nolan, you guys have given me the greatest gift—a family who loves and accepts me. I couldn’t ask for more.”

The End!

Thank you for reading Dark Knight. The next book in the series is Vengeful Pawn, coming in 2024.

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any given time.*

About the Author

KL Donn is a USA Today Bestselling Author addicted to coffee and tacos. As a Canadian author she writes in multiple romance genres and isn't afraid of a new challenge. She brings you stories that will break your heart and heal it all in one breath. With over 60 published titles since 2015, she has many more planned for the future and enjoys connecting with readers.

On her off time, she's bingeing Supernatural, Grey's Anatomy, and raising 4 amazing children. Married for more than half her life, she experienced her own happily ever after with husband Steve, at just 17. You'll find them both at book signings once or twice a year, she's the shy one, he's there to tell you all about the books his wife writes and how proud he is of her.

Currently she is diving back into the Adair Empire world with the children and has plans to keep the series going with generations of dark stories to come.

Krystal loves connecting with readers so please feel free to get in touch with her at any of the platforms below:

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