

MARIE JAMES

DEPRAVITY

Delivered

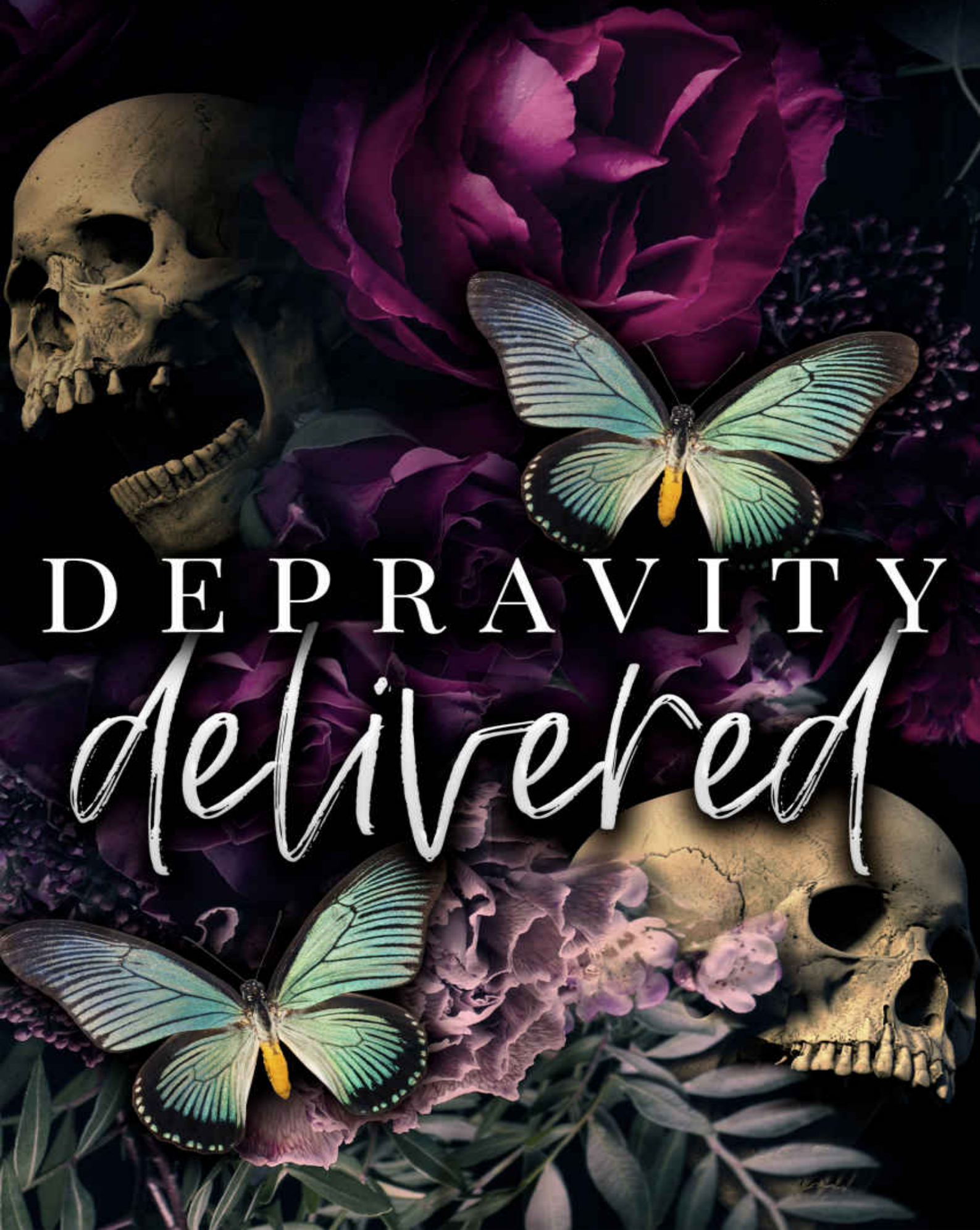


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Depravity Delivered
A Mission Mercenary Novel
Marie James

Copyright

Depravity Delivered: A Mission Mercenary Novel

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Synopsis

The job I took was personal for my boss, but my abduction quickly made it personal for me.

There's no forgiveness for the things they made me do to her.

It would be easy to point fingers, but what about the part of me that liked it?

Something triggered that sickness and left me needy.

I made a choice to protect her when I could, but the need to hurt her again is always in the back of my mind.

The crazy thing is, I see that same darkness in her eyes when she looks at me.

If we survive captivity, there's still no guarantee we'll survive each other.

Prologue

Ayla

4 months ago

“You have that same disappointed look Mom always had.”

“I do not,” I argue, looking away from my sister because I know exactly what look she’s referencing.

“You’re annoyed with something, and your face says it all.”

Alani stares at the side of my head until I face her. I don’t respond immediately because I know if I share what’s annoying me, she’s going to remind me that she’s an adult, and I can’t coddle her for the rest of her life.

“It’s nothing,” I assure her with a quick smile rather than telling her that I know she left out the fact that she’s in a coed dorm rather than one with all women.

She narrows her eyes at me, the same blue as mine, sparkling with the almost too-bright overhead lights.

I want to growl in irritation when some bro-dude yells about partying twenty-four seven in the hallway.

“I know how important this is for both of us,” Alani says, the direction she’s taking shocking me.

She clasps my hand in hers, and the kind gesture makes my eyes burn.

“It’s college. I have to be here. I promise I won’t get into trouble or skip classes. I know there aren’t extra reserves in the bank to cover me if I fail.” Her voice begins to clog with her own unshed tears. “I won’t let you, or them, down. I promise.”

Them. Our parents. The sting of their deaths is still raw even three years later.

I have a million things I'd like to say. I can count at least a hundred mistakes I've made over the last couple of years as her guardian. A hundred things my parents would've handled differently had they not died in a car accident when I was twenty. But in a way, I was still a kid then too, thrust into adulthood and asked to raise a fifteen-year-old girl because letting her go anywhere else was out of the question. I don't regret it.

Do I wish my parents were alive every single day? Of course I do. We both deserved more time with them.

"You have a long drive ahead of you," Alani reminds me.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" I give her a smile, but I can't handle much more than a twitch of my lips.

"If you cry, then I'm going to cry," she warns.

I blow out a harsh breath, trying to get better control of myself. I know I can keep calm in front of her. It's something I've mastered in the last couple of years. She didn't need to see me cry when life got to be too much. It wasn't her fault that the stress of making sure she was taken care of and nursing school was almost too much to handle. We got through it then, and we can get through it now. Her leaving for college was supposed to make things easier, but I'm certain her being four hours from our home in Plano will only increase my anxiety level.

"I'm going to need more lemur stuff," she says, changing the subject, something she has always been good at when the topic of conversation got too serious. "Did you see that girl in the hallway? Everything she brought with her was white, black, and purple."

"I'll keep it in mind for Christmas."

Just the thought of having to wait until the holidays to see her again makes my skin crawl and my throat threaten to close.

I know she chose Lindell University because she needed a break. I know there were times I was more than a little

smothering, but it comes with the job of being her sister and her parent. There were rules after my parents' deaths that didn't exactly match her age and activity level. She wasn't allowed to drive after dark. If she needed to be somewhere, I would take her because she definitely couldn't ride with anyone else. It really put a damper on her social life because there were days I had class or study sessions before I graduated that prevented her from being very spontaneous.

"Stop," she says, as she swipes at a few tears that have wandered down my cheeks. "I'm going to be fine."

"Don't get—"

"Don't get in the car with anyone," she interrupts. "I know. Everything in town is within walking distance to campus, remember? We looked at the map together."

The small town of Lindell is just right off campus. It's kitschy and cute. Very quiet and safe. At least that's what the brochure that came with Alani's "Welcome to Lindell" packet said. It's close enough to Austin, about an hour west of the state capitol, to keep from feeling like the town is out of touch with the world, but just far enough away to maintain its individuality.

"I'll be fine," she says when all I can manage is trying to blink away my tears. "Now, I'm not rushing you off, but I need to organize my half of the room before my roommate gets here tomorrow. I don't think she'll be very impressed with the way I have all my stuff scattered on her side."

I give her a quick nod, wrapping my arms around her. I don't hesitate to bury my face in her hair, wondering how Mom and Dad would've handled today. I know it would look different from lingering way past my welcome. I should've left not long after arriving, let Alani settle into her new independence, but I just couldn't stomach the thought of dropping her off and heading back home so quickly.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" I tease, as I pull back from the hug.

“Yes,” she says without hesitation, a smile drawing up her cheeks.

I can tell she’s teasing, but it still hits me harshly.

“You call me if you need anything. I know you’re going to be tempted to get a job, but remember, we talked about just using the first semester to settle in and get the hang of everything. I’ve had the trust set up, so you have more spending money your freshman year. You don’t have to worry about work until this summer.”

“I know,” she says, but I also know Alani.

If she thinks she’s more of a burden or if there’s a way to help any, she’ll take it. She’d never tell me, but I don’t doubt she’ll be walking the streets of Lindell looking for “help wanted” signs in the windows no later than tomorrow afternoon.

She gives me one more quick hug before walking toward the door.

“I’ll see you at Thanksgiving.”

I nod, squeezing her hand as I walk past her.

“Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. I promise.”

There’s something final and a little unnerving about how quickly she closes her dorm room door at my back, but I know exactly what she’s feeling. I felt the same way when my parents dropped me off on my first day of college. Alani wants the freedom that comes with no longer living at home. She’ll go through all the stages I went through, which means I also know to expect a call within the week, with her complaining about how homesick she is.

I dart out of the way seconds before colliding with a girl carrying a box she can’t see over. She mutters an apology when she walks past, and I refuse to wonder about her story, and why she doesn’t have someone here to help her. Alani and I aren’t the only ones who have arrived today without the help of a mom or dad. We aren’t the only ones to have suffered

tragedy. It's something I have to remind myself of often. Especially when I start feeling sorry for the two of us, when I start getting angry about the things we've clearly missed out on.

The lump that has been threatening to form all day finally lodges in my throat as I leave the dorm building and make my way to the parking lot.

I press my hands to the top of my car, knowing how dangerous it would be to drive home, as I sob. Internally, I chastise myself. I should have a better grip on things than I do right now. She'll be fine. What are the chances that tragedy will strike the same family twice? I couldn't tell you because the internet didn't exactly give me much when I searched that very question. It also didn't ease my mind, since it populated too many stories to count about families getting struck twice by tragedy.

I take a final deep breath, turning my head up to the dark sky, before opening my car door.

Feet shuffle behind me, and I turn a little to see whoever may be struggling to get a box from their car, but warmth hits my back. Although I know deep inside it isn't Alani, my head also doesn't go to a dark, ominous place, even as an arm wraps around me.

It's a prank. Some college kids dared to scare me as a frat initiation or something.

But instead of chuckles and an apology for being a jerk, I feel a pinch in the side of my neck.

It doesn't occur to me to scream for help until after my lips refuse to move.

My body grows heavy, my limbs hanging at my sides, even when I tell them to kick and scratch, to fight whatever this is happening to me.

I try to blink away the heaviness in my eyes, but my vision dulls, the lights of the parking lot shimmering after each blink, until my eyelids are just too heavy to keep open. The last thing I think about before my death is how grateful I am

that I've set up Alani's trust to ensure her school is paid for. Hopefully, she won't grieve me so long that she runs out of money before graduation.

Chapter 1

Ayla

Present Day

I stare down at the bruise on my forearm, unable to recollect how it got there. It's not from clumsiness. It's not marking my skin because I hit it on something. I can't recall the exact moment I was hurt because I'm hurt so often, it all starts to meld together.

I lift my eyes, wondering what made the noise that drew me out of my head, but no one passes in front of the doorway to my room. I've never seen a door hung on the hinges that remain.

Most would think that leaving would be easy, that attempting an escape would be too hard to resist with not being trapped inside, but my shackles don't come in the form of iron around my wrists. They have something much stronger that keeps me here, that keeps me compliant, that makes me do the things they demand of me without argument.

I fought them at first, of course I did, but these men don't deal with threats of death, at least not threats to me.

My face is emotionless as a shadow darkens the door. I learned that showing fear is exactly what most of the men here want. They like us scared. They want us to beg them for our freedom. Not giving them exactly what they want the second they arrive is the only way I fight them now, unless fighting them is what they demand, when really they want compliance. It took me a long time to figure it out, but once I did, the bruises, like the one on my forearm, were less frequent.

"There's my pretty blue-eyed girl," Pirro says as he enters, his accent thick with his Hispanic heritage.

I hate the sight of him, but I love these days. I'm damn near salivating at the bulge in his jeans. I know what it means, but there's always the off chance that he'll refuse me, that he'll make me beg, make me feel absolutely worthless before giving me what I want.

“Good morning,” I tell him, unsure of which man I’m going to get today.

I’m a nurse, so I deal in treatment, not diagnosis, but I’d put money on the fact that Pirro is a true psychopath. His moods change more than any person I’ve ever met before.

There’s a tremble in my hands that I bury in the sheet around my waist as he strokes over the bulge in his jeans, his chuckle telling me that even after four months, I’m no more capable of hiding my excitement than I was the first time he walked in here and explained what he had for me.

Someone screams down the hall, and his grin falters, replaced with frustration. It tells me that he’s not very happy with whatever he’ll have to deal with, but I can only hope he gives me what I want before transitioning his focus to other matters.

Another scream, one that’s cutoff in a way that makes me want to cry, echoes into the room.

“For fuck’s sake,” he mutters, reaching into his pocket. He tosses my weekly desire on the bed in front of me, but I learned my lesson about reaching for it.

Nothing happens around here until permission is given. I lost my privilege the first time because I was too eager.

“Go ahead, you stupid bitch. I don’t have all fucking day.”

“Thank you,” I tell him as I reach for the prepaid phone.

There’s only one number on this phone, and it’s labeled *DON’T FORGET*. It brought tears to my eyes the first time I selected it. It was the final reminder to play my part and keep my mouth closed. It’s as effective as it would be if it was named correctly.

“You would not believe who I saw in town yesterday,” Alani says, her voice jovial and full of excitement.

“Who?” I ask, my voice now calm and collected. It’s what’s required if I want to keep the privilege of speaking with her once a week.

“Derek Kaye, the bass guitarist from Beyond the Lies.”

“He’s a little far from California, isn’t he?”

I look up, locking eyes with Pirro as I speak with Alani. He listens to every second of my calls, waiting for me to attempt to alert her to my whereabouts as if I have any clue other than somewhere in Mexico.

“They played at a venue in Austin this weekend.”

“Did you get to see them?”

“I had to work.”

“I told you about—”

“I know,” she says, her mood shifting a little. “I don’t have to work, but then again, I really do, don’t I? I’m bored here, and with you away, I need something to do with my time.”

I frown, wishing I was there, wishing she were safe.

“I needed this for myself,” I lie.

“And Christmas?”

Silence fills the line.

“I figured it was going to be just like Thanksgiving. I’ve already asked Blakely if I can go to her house.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, clearing my throat because crying will make this call end faster.

“It’s fine,” she mutters, but I know it’s not.

She’s feeling discarded, but it’s better than the alternative.

“What am I supposed to do for summer break?”

“I’m working on it,” I tell her, my eyes once again looking up at Pirro.

He rolls his hand in front of him, telling me to hurry up.

“I have to go. There are—”

“Other people waiting to use the phone,” she grumbles. “Talk to you next week.”

The line goes dead, but Pirro checks to make sure when I pass the phone to him, before sliding it back into the front pocket of his jeans.

“It’s time to go to work,” he says, standing at the end of the bed.

There’s no arguing, no telling him I don’t feel well. It wouldn’t exactly be a lie. I haven’t felt well a single day since I arrived, and that sickness just grew when my expectations were laid out. I fought against them, uncaring about what happened to me. There was no way I’d ever do the things they wanted, but then Raul Cortez, the man who owns this place, sat across from me and wordlessly handed me a photo.

I sobbed, running my fingers over Alani’s smiling face. I knew what they wanted, and without him saying a word, I knew what the consequences would be if I didn’t give them what they wanted.

I stand from the bed, waiting for Pirro to get his fill of my naked body, unsure if I’ll be handed a robe today or not. The only consistent thing around here, other than the weekly phone call to Alani, is the inconsistency.

“This morning is easy,” Pirro says as he follows closely behind me as I walk into the hallway.

I step aside as one of the other guys struggles with a woman fighting against him, as he all but drags her down the hallway. I remember being her. I remember spitting in their faces and telling them I’d slit their throats given a half-second chance to do so. It’s very possible she has no one to threaten, no one that losing would make her wish she was dead. Some days I wish that were the case for me, but they’ve effectively used Alani to keep me in line. I know I have a breaking point, that one day they’ll ask too much of me, but they haven’t found it yet. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect my sister, to keep her in the dark about where I’ve been the last four months.

She thinks I took a job with a humanitarian organization that offers medical care. She thinks I'm in Peru, in a small town on the western coast of South America, where I have to travel over an hour to a small village to use a pay phone to speak with her. It keeps her from calling the number back that shows up on her cell phone.

There will come a time when she either gives up on me altogether or she asks too many questions. I know Raul and Pirro will eventually stop the calls, but right now, they're a very effective threat, a reminder of what I'm trading my compliance for.

I swallow down the threat of bile in my throat as I open the door.

The man on the bed is smiling, his hand already working up and down his erection.

"Don't shower when you're done," Pirro says. "The next one wants it sloppy."

I give the best fake smile I can manage as I walk into the room and close the door behind me, when all I want to do is take the lamp from the bedside table and smash it into his head.

Chapter 2

Nash

“Pair of fours?” Pirro asks, a sly smirk on his scarred face. “You can’t win with fours.”

Several of the other guys around the table chuckle at my misfortune as Pirro shows his hand. Pocket aces as if he really thinks I believe that he’s lucky enough to get them the last four hands.

He’s fucking cheating, and if this was the only game I was playing, there’s a very good chance I’d put a bullet in his head. But poker isn’t the main activity of the night. I’m also not playing with my own money. This is business. All overhead, including sitting at the same table as these pieces of shit and gambling away thousands of dollars, is provided by Angel Guerra, the owner of Mission Mercenaries.

Angel isn’t exactly my boss. He’s more like a facilitator. He finds jobs and hires them out, paying the expenses and, of course, keeping a cut of the money for himself. It’s his way of staying safe at home while others put their lives at risk. I think a lot of people would be bitter about it, but I’m not. I live for shit like this. The more danger, the better. The greater the risk, the greater the pay, or however the fucking quote goes. I’m not in it for the money, but the payout doesn’t exactly suck.

“This is my last hand,” I tell the men, as the guy to my right shuffles the deck of cards.

I don’t keep my attention on him. My scrutiny would make it harder to cheat, and I don’t give a shit about the cards I’m dealt.

“Going to be broke after this. I’m going to have to stop playing with you guys.”

“That’s what you say every night,” Pirro says as he lifts his glass of tequila to his lips. “And yet every night, you show up with more money.”

“This is really it,” I say, wondering if I’m playing my other hand a little too soon. “You guys seem to have an endless supply of money. How about giving me a job so I can keep losing to you guys?”

The goal was to get in with these guys and figure out where they’re operating their business.

Angel has it on good authority that they’re somehow connected to Raul Cortez, one of the most prolific cartel leaders in Mexico and South America in decades. The criminal runs guns, drugs, and is rumored to be in the skin trade.

Angel, as well as Liam, another one of the guys who he hires out for work, were taken on separate occasions by one of these groups. They’re certain that Raul Cortez was in the middle of it.

“You’d have a better chance of earning good money in the States,” Pirro says.

“I’m a wanted man,” I tell him, not for the first time, as an excuse for being in Mexico to begin with. I want them to think I’m here permanently, that I’m not just here for a good time before returning home.

We place our bets, my hand just as shitty as the dozen before it.

I can understand these guys not being willing to take a chance on someone they think doesn’t even speak Spanish. If Angel’s suspicions are true, they’re abducting and selling men, women, and children to make the money they’re gambling with tonight.

It’s the injustice as well as the thrill that made me step forward, volunteering for the job that was deemed more dangerous than others Angel has arranged in the past.

It doesn’t seem any more dangerous. If I were winning and taking their money, I could quite possibly end up with a gun to my head, but right now, all I have is a minor buzz from the tequila and a bad attitude because I think they’re honestly trying to get caught cheating. I can’t tell if they want me to call them on it or keep ignoring it.

They haven't once hinted that I may be given a chance with their organization, and I've been asking about it since the day we met two weeks ago. I tried to get them to brag, to tell me why everyone gave them such a wide berth when they walked into the bar. I knew there was something about them that no one was willing to speak about. They wielded some form of power because everyone seemed afraid of them. It told me I was on the right track, but I've gotten no closer since day one. Angel is growing irritated with the wire transfers because I've lost so much money to these assholes.

I'm thinking it would be easier if this were more like a normal job. If I had someone to rescue, some sick fucks to kill, then I'd have been done a long time ago. But according to Angel, these guys don't really matter to Cortez in the grand scheme of things. I could kill them and get no closer to tracking Raul down, and the heat it would bring wouldn't be worth it. It could mean the leader might go underground and we'd never find him. At the same time, I've been acting just like these guys, making crude comments to women, confessing crimes, and drinking more than my liver can honestly handle. I'm not any closer to Raul Cortez and his organization than I was the day I drove into Monterrey. I don't even know if these assholes are part of the man's team or if they just throw his name around because of the fear it puts in the local people's eyes. They could be playing me as much as they're playing everyone else, and unless they actually come out and say it, I'll never know.

We go around the table, all men but Pirro and myself folding. I know what to expect before the raise, but I go through the motions, sliding the last of my money into the pile at the center of the table.

He drops my hand, this one showcasing a pair of jacks. The glint in his eyes, the one that speaks of victory, doesn't falter, and I glare at him when he drops down the pair of aces. These guys aren't even bothering to use the ace of hearts or the ace of diamonds. The spade and club mock me from in front of him, but what the hell can I do about it? I have no doubt all the people in this bar will come to his defense if I so much as

allow my hand to twitch, no matter how fearful they are of him.

“See you tomorrow,” Pirro says as I stand.

I shake my head. “Wasn’t joking when I said I was completely out of money.”

He nods his head once, a single dip of acknowledgment instead of taking the bait and offering me a job.

I walk away, knowing the plan now is to follow them when they leave. Something Angel warned me against doing until I knew that they wouldn’t let me into their organization.

Two weeks isn’t exactly long enough to gain the trust of hardened criminals, but it was the timeline I gave myself.

There’s a devious smile playing on my face as I walk outside. I know the next time I see Pirro, it will be when I press my gun to his forehead. I’ll remind him of all the times he cheated me out of Angel’s money before I pull the trigger.

The bar in the seedy part of Monterrey hasn’t invested much in the way of safety for their patrons, but the outside of the bar isn’t exactly welcoming either. There are no flashing neon signs like you’d see on a bar in the States. There isn’t an open sign in the single window. They don’t want strangers showing up, and that’s what caused such curiosity when I arrived two weeks ago.

My presence in the bar was noticed by the locals and regulars. Pirro saw me as a chump, someone who would be easy to cheat out of money. He was right, in a way. I allowed it as much on day one as I did tonight. I wanted him to see me as someone he could control, someone who would do what he demanded and not ask questions. I pretended to be afraid of him, and it was harder than I ever could’ve imagined. Angel said this job was more dangerous, but I didn’t take into account that he meant because losing my fucking temper on those assholes would be a test I was most certainly going to fail.

I want to kick the trash can out front, but it would only draw more unwanted attention in my direction. I might have

wanted to be on their radar the second I stepped into the bar, but now I need to become a shadow. I need to be able to follow Pirro from this bar tonight, back to the place where he runs the day-to-day operations for Raul Cortez.

I'm fairly certain the man doesn't work for the gun and drug running side of things. Not with the way his eyes looked over every woman he saw in a way that made me feel like he was calculating the money he could get for each and every one of them.

The sound of shuffling feet hits me a second too late for me to elbow my assailant in the gut. I blame Pirro and his uncanny way of making my temper flair for the mistake.

Getting mugged outside of this shitty bar would honestly just be par for the course with how unlucky I've been lately.

This guy is going to be incredibly pissed when he finds nothing but empty pockets.

But instead of him patting me down or demanding I give him money, I feel a fucking prick in my neck. It isn't a robbery but an abduction.

I know who has me before I hear his raspy voice in my ear.

He curses at me in Spanish. Although I understand him calling me a fucking idiot, I'm a little regretful that I've spent so many years working jobs around Mexico and South America, and I haven't been bothered to fully learn the language. Learning to speak Spanish when all I ever do is shoot people has seemed like a waste of time up until this point. As my body fights the drugs in my system, I find that it would really be helpful with where I'm going.

I wasn't able to infiltrate the Cortez cartel the way I wanted, but at least this will put me on the inside.

I can't help the sinking feeling that I may have bitten off more than I can chew, that this has no way of ending with my survival.

Chapter 3

Ayla

I shove my hands into the front pockets of the robe Pirro allowed me to wear.

The women they've brought in aren't exactly calm, but they'd be less calm if they saw a line of women standing there naked. There's a good chance they've already been hurt, have already had to survive untold horrors before getting to this point in their journey, but women that are a hundred percent combative are extremely hard to handle. The men are well aware that they're out numbered five to one, but they also know we'd never conspire to overthrow them. We have too much to lose, too many others to worry about than just ourselves. If it were only about us, those of us standing to the side as they urge the crying women to form a straight line, we'd be in shallow graves out back like many of the ones that had nothing to lose.

I try not to make eye contact with any of them. The men may see it as a way to communicate with them, to assure them they'll be okay. I don't look at them because I know how it will be. I'd never offer hope when there was none to be found.

The best I can do is show these women that being calm allows me to stand here unharmed. They have no way of knowing just how bruised my back is. They can't see the damage one of the customers caused days ago with a whip. They'll learn soon enough that there's no lack of depravity in a place like this, but complying also comes with certain privileges. Complying has earned me my own room, despite the fact that it doesn't have a door. It means I'm no longer forced to my knees in a filthy cage in the basement. Doing the things asked of me keeps my sister safe, despite knowing she's growing increasingly annoyed with my absence.

One of the guys grabs the breast of the only woman not sobbing and begging to be released. She glares at him, as if she'd claw his skin from his bones if her hands weren't tied behind her back. When she tries to jerk away, he only grips her

tighter. She's a fast learner, gritting her teeth and standing still until the man releases her. I'm not foolish enough to think she's broken. If anything, she'll wait until she thinks she can win before fighting back with everything she has. That will be the day she dies. It may be out of anger, one of the men going too far because his pride won't let him stop until she's dead. It may be at the hands of one of the customers who has always dreamed of raping and then killing someone. But the end for her will be the same, unless they find something to blackmail her with, and even then, the stronger women refuse to comply.

I drop my eyes, knowing it isn't fair to think that way. Every one of these women has their own stories, their own reasons for reacting the way they do. Some of them will fight until the death because they can't help themselves. It's no more my place to judge them for how they handle this unimaginable situation, any more than it is for them to judge me.

Sobs aren't uncommon around here. Sometimes we cry because we can't help it. Sometimes we cry because it's asked of us. Sometimes we cry because we'd rather be anywhere but here, including one of the shallow graves out back.

Two men hold one of the women as Pirro approaches her, and my hands sweat in my robe pockets. My first instinct is to jump on his back and claw at him until he's a bloody mess. I swallow down a scream when he punches her in the gut after she spits in his face. Guilt swims inside of me when he touches her and I stand there and do nothing.

We don't talk to each other. There's not much I know about the women standing on either side of me, but we all have our reasons for not helping the woman Pirro is hurting.

It isn't about bravery. I know it's Alani keeping me from helping this woman. Maybe I should feel ashamed that I'm putting my sister before any other person here. The threat on her means they could pull a knife and give me an ultimatum, watch this one die or protect my sister, and I'd choose Alani every single time. I'm the only person she has left, and I'd let the world burn down around me before I'd pick differently.

“Please stop,” one of the new women begs as Pirro pulls his fist back once again, his intention to hit her in the face this time evident.

The man may seem like he acts without reason, but his eyes dart in her direction. It will probably be the last time the woman tries to stand up for someone else. They’ll get compliance any way they can, and she’ll be no different. By the time I see her again, she’ll be standing there just as silently as we are on this side of the room.

Pirro leans in close to her, forcing her to take a step back until she’s pressed against the wall. I can’t hear what he says as he lowers his mouth to her ear, but it’s enough to make any courage she’s been capable of mustering seep from her. Her face turns ashen, her bottom lip trembling with fear. He has no shortage of threats, and the scary thing about Pirro when his boss isn’t around is that he’s more than capable and incredibly willing to follow through with each and every one of them.

Raul Cortez is different. The man is completely capable of every evil thing Pirro does, but he’s less likely to act out of anger, and even less inclined to hurt someone just for the hell of it. We’re a commodity for Cortez, just something to be bought and sold, something to be traded on occasion. He’s never intentionally cruel despite the nature of his business. It also means he’s just as quick, if not quicker, to dispose of someone he considers not worth the effort.

I’m on my best behavior when called up by Raul, but it’s times like now when the boss is away that Pirro, his second-in-command, thrives on hurting people.

Cold chills race down my skin when Pirro turns from the woman to face me. I hate the look in his eyes. It could mean any number of things.

I keep my eyes on him as he approaches, the other men shuffling the women along to be processed. I know what happens next, and it also makes me lift my hand to the back of my neck. The number tattooed there seems to itch, despite having been healed for a long time now.

“I need your help in one of the other rooms,” Pirro says.

I nod, knowing not to argue with him. My help could be anything. It could be with a client, or one of the new women. It could be because he wants to watch me service one of the other guys or that he's needing to be serviced himself. I pray for anything but the latter because Pirro is a sadist through and through. I hate having his attention, but I refuse to let the guilt bubble up too much with thinking that he'll be too busy with the new girls to bother with me.

I've learned not to act surprised when I step into a room, but there isn't a corpse and blood to clean up this time.

A man stands in the middle of the room, his arms suspended over his head, held in place by chains. He's been stripped to the skin except for the blindfold over his eyes, his body showcasing Pirro's handiwork. Cuts ooze all over. His chest, thighs, and abdomen seep with blood, the redness around the wounds making it clear they've already begun to fester a little.

"I need you to keep him alive," Pirro says. "Your shit is over there."

My eyes follow the point of his fingers across the room to the familiar tackle box. It houses a crude first aid kit I've used many times since they researched me and discovered I worked as an ER nurse at one of the hospitals in Plano.

It's not very often that Pirro even bothers to bring men back here. The man in this room is only the second that I know of since I've been here. The first man didn't last a week. I watched three men kick him into one of the holes they dug that's visible from my bedroom window. I doubt this man will have a different fate, but it will not be because I didn't offer him the best medical care I'm capable of providing with such limited supplies.

He wakes when I press the first piece of medicated gauze to his skin, the sting bringing him back from whatever reprieve his body was allowing that caused him to pass out.

He jerks against his restraints, and I take a step back, wishing he wasn't blindfolded so he would understand I'm not one of the people who means him harm. Unless it's a

command issued by Pirro. I want to tell him that I'm as much a captive as he is, but explanations aren't allowed. We'd both be punished if I attempted it.

"Let me clean your cuts," I say instead, knowing it's skating a fine line, but taking the risk anyway.

He doesn't try to pull away when I approach him again, and I feel more than just his eyes on me.

I don't have to turn around to know that Pirro has activated the video camera on the far side of the room. They record and sell everything that happens around here. I have no doubt part one of this man's time here has already been uploaded to some scummy porn site and subscribers are itching for the next part.

Raul Cortez is a smart man, realizing that selling videos to thousands will bring much more money than allowing one client to witness whatever Pirro's plans are for each of us.

The real money comes from the live feeds, and I have no doubt they plan to sell this man's murder not only to the highest bidder of the person who wants to kill someone, but they'll also make money by uploading the death online. If it isn't uploaded, it's because they're using the tape to blackmail whoever the murderer is.

I've heard the men whisper about the amounts people are willing to pay to do such depraved things. To be able to do it and not have it recorded comes at a high price. One too many people are willing to pay for the opportunity.

I can't count how many times I've been threatened with a tape being sent to Alani or the police. Even if I manage to escape and save my sister, my life would be ruined. They have me on so many different tapes, doing so many illegal things. I learned long before that they didn't have to threaten me in the moment to get me to comply, so it's not like there are voices in the background, telling me my sister will die if I argue. I accepted that this will be what my life looks like until I'm no longer needed. It makes me wonder if I didn't have the medical skills that I possess, if they would've already killed me. Some nights I let myself imagine that even when they no

longer consider me helpful that they'll let my sister live. I pray she's too much trouble to bother with once my time is done. It's the only thing keeping me going most days.

The man winces, his body jerking to the side in a way that tells me he just can't help it when I press the gauze to his skin.

It takes me well over an hour to stitch closed his wounds, each second spent with me wondering just how much infection I'm closing inside. I can tell he's a fighter, that he's trying to stay brave with the way he clenches his jaw each time my needle pierces his skin. His bravery only means they'll hurt him more before they kill him.

I want to tell him the quicker he gives into the pain, the faster it will all stop. The best he can hope for is death.

"Leave that one," Pirro instructs when I reach for the shallow incision on the left side of his ribcage.

I move on, adding more antiseptic to a clean piece of gauze before pressing it to a spot on his back that looks similar to the way the area would look when skin has been excised for a graft. Sometimes Pirro likes to get creative when he hurts others.

"Leave that one alone, too," the demon demands.

I pull my hands back, giving the man a final once-over. I step back when I find nothing else to treat.

"Clean his entire body," Pirro says, kicking a bucket of soapy water. Water sloshes over the edge, making me realize just how cold it is when I step forward, the water that spilled chilling my bare feet.

"Nice and slow," Pirro commands. "I want him to enjoy it."

My throat threatens to seize as I reach into the bucket for the sponge. I know exactly what the man is asking, and I have a good idea of where this is going. It's not going to be something either one of us enjoys.

Chapter 4

Nash

“Nice and slow. I want him to enjoy it.”

The sound of Pirro’s voice has always gotten on my nerves, but the irritation I felt losing money to him playing poker is nothing compared to the way I hate the sound of it now.

I’m torn between fighting and acting as bravely as I can manage. I doubt kicking and screaming would change the trajectory of what happens next, any more than being quiet would. I know for my own sake, I need to face this with as much dignity as I can manage.

I wince, my body controlling my reaction to the cold cloth pressed to my shoulder blade. I don’t know why I expected warmth when Pirro instructed the woman to clean me.

I also don’t want to evaluate why I’m a little calmer, knowing they are feminine hands touching me rather than those of a man.

It doesn’t stop my skin from crawling, knowing that I’m being touched without my permission. Although this doesn’t feel like any type of sexual assault yet, I’ve never given up power in the bedroom or elsewhere. I hate the complacency I’m attempting. It’s not like I think Pirro will commend me for behaving in a certain way and release me. I’m also not foolish enough to give them any reason to end me before I have the chance to fight back. I refuse to imagine it all ending for me this way, that I’ll die before I get to claim a pound of his flesh.

My back molars make an awful noise, grinding together as the cold rag runs down the length of one arm. I don’t think my body will ever have the chance to get used to what’s happening to it. It’s nothing like submerging your entire body in cold water. There’s no possibility of acclimation as she moves from one area to the next.

She sewed up some wounds and was instructed to leave others open. There's a very real chance with how deep Pirro has cut me, in the many hours since he took me from that parking lot, that I'll die from infection before he's tired of hurting me. Unless there are ice cubes in the water she's using, then I also have a fever. It feels much colder on my skin than just regular water would.

"Ignoring it won't keep it from happening," Pirro says, and a second later, I jerk at the sensation of her lifting my flaccid cock.

I growl into the cloth shoved in my mouth, wishing they would've just tied something around my head like they always do in the movies. Being abducted in real life looks nothing like I've seen on television. A wad of fabric is shoved so far in my mouth, I periodically wonder how quickly I'd suffocate if they held my nose. The sounds I'm capable of would be easy to decipher if anyone in the room gave a shit about my opinion on the matter.

I do my best to move away, but the chains keeping me suspended don't leave much room for movement. I feel like I've been hanging here for days, my shoulder screaming in pain from the times I've passed out.

"After it's clean, suck it," Pirro says. I fight even harder, wondering how quickly they'd kill me if I kick this woman in the fucking face.

She isn't crying. I don't hear a whimper of disagreement, despite the growly way he commands what she's doing. It leaves me confused. I'd expect her to beg, to bargain her way out of doing what's being asked of her. The confusion leaves me still for the briefest of moments, but then my cock is engulfed in warmth. I want to fight against it and let it settle inside of me at the same time.

I hate my fucking body for the way it responds, my cock thickening and lengthening. It doesn't give much credit to the male species with how easily arousal happens. If I weren't sliced to pieces, if Pirro hadn't cut into me over and over, I might be stronger. I might be able to push her away when my

tormentor chuckles at my reaction. I don't want to give him what he wants. I want to fight him every step of the way, but at the same time, I know I'd be a fool not to take what may be the last ounce of pleasure I'll feel before I die.

Knowing right from wrong and doing right instead of wrong are two very different things.

I kick at her, wanting to sob like a fucking baby at the way the muscles in my shoulders seem to tear when I add the full weight of my body to them.

I continue to growl into my gag despite the effort being fruitless.

I don't know when I give in to it. I can't even recall if I reasoned with myself to settle down, that fighting now when my only choice is losing is incredibly stupid.

Maybe it was her skill, the way she took me to the back of her throat. Maybe it was the low hum I could feel vibrate up her chest until it settled inside of me like a gift. Maybe it was having at least one part of my body that doesn't hurt. Maybe it was the warmth of her mouth or the slight tremble in her hands when she wrapped them behind my thighs.

All I know is a calmness washes over me, and I let my head loll to the side on my shoulders.

It doesn't take long, that urgency racing through my muscles that tells me I'm going to come. I fight against it, having no clue what happens after, but at the same time wanting this to last forever. Eeriness seeps inside of me that this will be the very last ounce of pleasure I'll feel before I die.

It doesn't keep the orgasm at bay, and before too long, my cock is falling, spent, from her lips.

"How's he taste?" Pirro asks, making me jerk at the realization I'm still tied, still gagged, still the victim.

"Delicious," she whispers, an edge to her voice that I immediately fucking hate.

This woman is no better than the man who sliced at my fucking skin. She's hurting me in a very different way, but it

doesn't make the abuse any less real. I've witnessed it before, women who are just as cruel and evil as their male counterparts.

I vow to end her the same way I'll end Pirro—slowly and without hesitation.

“Stick around,” Pirro says, an ominous tone to his voice. “You'll need to sew him back up after I'm done with him.”

Chapter 5

Ayla

I lost count of how many times I had to clear my throat in an effort to keep from crying. I've seen so many terrible things come through the emergency room at the hospital I used to work at. Horrific amputations and injuries that would take months to recover from were all a part of the job, expected even with the hospital being right off the interstate. Car crashes aren't exactly selective in how they will hurt a person, but watching Pirro cut into this man goes against everything I've been taught as a healer.

The only breaks the man has been given is when Pirro steps to the side to snort a line of coke, but he doesn't even bother to rinse his hands before sticking the rolled-up money in his nose.

His pupils are dilated, the cuts on the man's skin forcing blood to drip from so many areas on his body I wonder if each of his breaths will be his last. Honestly, his death seems more like a reward than a punishment at this point. I pray that it ends soon, but the power the cocaine is telling Pirro he has is only going to make it last forever.

I don't let my head dip despite my own exhaustion. I feel a certain type of kinship with the man, wishing I could speak and tell him he isn't alone. I wish I could beg him to give up, to give into that voice that's telling him to walk into the light or whatever the hell someone sees when they're on the brink of death, but it feels selfish, and maybe in part, it is. If a client comes and wants something Pirro feels I have to offer, I won't be given time to rest before being expected to perform. I'm lucky to sleep a handful of hours each day. I don't know why I'd expect today to be any different.

I eye the bucket of soapy water, wondering what Pirro's response would be if I scooped some up and drank it. Not only because I'm desperate to rinse the taste of that man's cum from my mouth but also because I'm so fucking thirsty, I'm no longer able to even pull spit into my mouth. I know how crazy

the thought is. It's not just soap in there but the man's blood from cleaning his body. Plus, I wouldn't put it past Pirro to contaminate it with other stuff as well.

I force down a gag, thinking of washing the man then sucking him off.

I'm sickened by everything I've been forced to do, but I can't let myself focus on it. Doing so only makes me think of Alani and the sacrifices she'd make to save me. I imagine it might be the very same things I'd agree to when they were asked of me to protect her.

If Cortez could guarantee her safety in exchange for my death, I'd agree without hesitation, much the way I think Alani would do for me.

It's been threatened that if I commit suicide, Pirro would take a trip to Lindell and make Alani take my place. I'd do anything to keep her from even suffering a second of what I've faced.

It's what has me straightening my spine and forcing my eyes to stay open. I've learned my lesson about looking away.

Pirro takes the blade to the man's skin, and I hate that I know exactly what it feels like.

With men, Pirro wants them to act brave until he breaks them.

With women, he wants them to act as if they like the pain. I hate when he gets a glint in his eyes, meaning he picks me. I have scars that will last a lifetime on my skin. I no longer dream of having a family, being blessed to kiss a man before falling asleep. I'll no longer have the chance to hold a crying baby to my chest with words of comfort coming from my lips. I'll no longer grow old, will no longer be able to watch my sister graduate from college or walk down the aisle. I'll no longer be able to give her advice when she faces motherhood herself.

I've come to accept those things, but I think fighting my reality versus how I wanted my life to be is the hardest struggle. Who cares about the bruises and scars of right now

when it's giving up everything I've dreamed of that's the real struggle.

I went through the same internal arguments in the months after my parents' deaths. I couldn't imagine facing a future without my mom and dad, but I managed. I've cried just as much as I did back then when I felt like I could get away with it, when the house grew quiet in the hours just after dawn.

"Fucking pussy," Pirro spits when he realizes the man has either passed out from the extensive pain or he's finally died.

I watch him, waiting for his intake of breath, not feeling very relieved when his chest rises.

Pirro drops the scalpel he's been using, bored now that the man isn't fighting against him. I hold my breath as he takes a step back.

I've witnessed this before, but this time seemed a little more personal. Pirro talked about betrayal and lies as he cut this man. He growled obscenities and accused him of trying to manipulate him. He didn't go into any detail, and for that I'm glad. I don't want to know any more about this man. I don't want to feel sorry for him. I don't want any fucking connection. It compromises my own health and well-being.

I've never been more grateful for the rules around here than I am today. It's hard enough to witness his life draining out of him. If I knew his life story, who he might be trying to protect, I might fight for him.

With the rule that we don't speak to each other, it saves me from forming that connection. The captor's reasoning is it keeps people from wanting to help, and I'm thankful for it. I don't want to help him in the moment, if it means harm will come to my sister down the road. There's no one here worth it, but I'm also normally a compassionate person. It's rare to meet someone in the medical field who didn't at least start their careers that way. Many grow cold as time goes by. Many lose compassion just from witnessing so many terrible things so often, and I can only hope that it begins happening to me. I

caught myself more than once when I wanted to step up and beg Pirro to stop hurting him.

My own wounds itch at seeing some of the same fresh marks on his skin, in particular the ones on my back and thighs. The five hundred and twelve tattooed on the back of his neck makes me wonder, not for the first time, which digits have been tattooed into my own neck.

Pirro waves his arm at the man before stumbling toward the door. I move toward the tackle box of supplies just as the door slams shut. I cringe when it takes no longer than a minute for someone else's screams to reach my ears. I don't consider the man lucky that Pirro stopped hurting him because he's still alive. It means that the evil man will only wait until he's capable of staying awake before he starts all over again.

I start by applying antiseptic to the wounds Pirro didn't re-slice open first, unable to get the thought of that dirty water being on them out of my mind. I don't have much at my disposal to prevent infection from setting in, but I can do my best. It only prolongs the inevitable, and I'm struggling with the idea of rubbing dirt into them. Death is the best thing this man can hope for, but I don't have to look over my shoulder to know that the camera is still recording. Trying to save him isn't worth the threat of my own punishments if I do anything above what Pirro is asking of me.

Next, I disinfect the deepest wounds before stitching them up. He doesn't so much as twitch this time when the needle pierces his skin. His skin is hot to the touch, making it very clear the infection I was worried about is already working its way through his body.

I tend to every wound, wiping away so much blood, working from the top to the bottom. It isn't until I press a piece of gauze to the spot Pirro stripped his skin away from his shin that he once again jerks awake.

He cusses at me into the gag but his body still hangs, his energy completely zapped from what he's already faced to try and get away. I'd never risk pulling the gag from his mouth or the blindfold from his eyes, but I clamp his calf, only touching

part of his body that somehow managed to remain injury free, hoping he understands that I'm here to help rather than hurt.

He settles once again, but I don't know if he's calm because of the comfort I offered him or if he passed out once again.

I don't spare him a second glance after I finish doing what's been commanded of me before I leave the room. I don't have the luxury of worrying about anyone but myself and Alani.

Chapter 6

Nash

There are many things people expect in life.

For me, I expect criminals to always be criminals. Their degree and frequency of crime may taper off some as they get older, but if they lived their life achieving goals from hurting or stealing from others, then they'll continue that in some capacity until they die.

So Pirro hurting me didn't come as a surprise. Pirro slicing at my skin and muttering shit about betrayal, as if I was his best friend rather than some guy that joined their poker game a few weeks ago, was a little out of character for him, at least from what I know about the man.

My guess is that he had a bet with one of the other guys that I was just some gringo idiot that sucked at poker. If they looked in my truck, they would've learned differently. Well, they would've learned I wasn't only an idiot because it was incredibly stupid of me to have notes about the cartel in my glove box, and if I weren't still suspended to the fucking ceiling by chains, I'd kick myself for it.

What is surprising, what angered me more than Pirro just being his same sadistic self, is the woman who sucked me off on command then stuck around and watched Pirro slice me to pieces. I didn't hear sobs or her pleading for him to stop. Her silence was so loud it was all that I could focus on for a large part of it.

Maybe it's my own bias, but it's not uncommon for people to expect women to be protectors, to not be afraid to step forward and tell someone to stop hurting others. She didn't even whisper her distaste for what Pirro was doing.

I can honestly say I hate her as much as I hate Pirro, possibly more because of her gender. I mentally add her to my list of people to tear apart if I'm ever able to escape. I barter with myself that I'll do it when given any chance because freedom at this point is hopeless. If I can escape my shackles

for the briefest of seconds, I'll make her wish she'd spoken up against Pirro.

Even when my blindfold shifted enough for me to see down my face at her as she cleaned the wounds she never attempted to stop, I wanted to hurt her back. I don't care if she looked utterly torn apart at what had been done to me. The little squeeze to my calf doesn't mean a fucking thing. It's like attempting to bail out the Titanic with a fucking shot glass; pointless.

If it weren't for the full body exhaustion, I would've fought against her as much as I managed against Pirro, but at some point I realized I needed to use my head.

I don't want to die at his hands, if anything just to spite him, and her supplies looked clean. She wasn't overly hurtful in the way she tended to my injuries, but I don't know if her care and attention will even help. I know the chills I had were dangerous. I know that it was bad news when I could no longer feel him cutting into me. I needed her help. I know it only means that she's helping Pirro keep me alive so he can hurt me more, but I refuse to give in to that fucking bastard.

I growled and cussed both of them, but nothing translated with the gag in my mouth.

I don't know how long I hang here. It already seems like days since I was taken from outside the bar, when in reality, it has probably only been a few hours.

The door at my back shifts, and I know just from the evil aura surrounding whoever entered that this isn't going to be very fun for me. At least the woman didn't have this wave of hatred flowing off her. If anything, she was indifferent with the task she'd been given, as if sewing up a guy she just witnessed getting sliced was an everyday occurrence.

I blink into the too-bright light in the room when the blindfold is ripped from my face, growling when it pulls several hairs from the back of my head that got trapped in the knot.

I glare at Pirro as he stands before me, threatening him with a look because it's all I'm capable of right now.

He circles me, and terror, a feeling I fucking hate more than anything, runs down my spine. He'd be the type of coward to kill me without facing me. I hate the fear of knowing that and not knowing if that's what he's planning right now.

The air grows thicker, heavier, and I hear several more people enter the room. I chance a glance down my body, an attempt to assess the damage despite not being able to do anything about the wounds.

The stitches look better than I'd guess was possible in a torture chamber. Each wound is covered in a slick salve, and I know the barrier is a blessing against the dirt and grime that is layered in this room. There are no bandages despite the care she took to tend to every cut.

I cry out in pain, hating the cowardice in my muffled pleas, when four strong hands grab me. They aren't cautious of my wounds, but expecting psychopaths to have concern for someone else is pointless. They struggle to lift my weight enough to relieve the chains enough to pull them free. Or maybe they're as big of a sadist as Pirro is, and taking their time is somehow satisfying that dark, demented place inside of them.

Eventually, the chains are released, each link sliding down my body and grabbing at the stitches marring my skin. I swear one wound is reopened, but it looks mostly intact when I glance down at it.

I feel like I've been dragged behind a bus after getting run over by it several times. Not once in my life have I felt what I do now. If it weren't for my pride, I would beg for death. For once, I'm grateful for the gag in my mouth because I don't know that I'd be able to stop myself if I knew they could fully understand what I'm saying.

Despite having a man on either side of me, they still drag me out of the room, my knees nearly touching the floor. I know I'm still alive because the pain it causes is excruciating.

I don't know if it's sweat or fucking tears making my eyes burn.

I always knew death would come earlier for me than it did most people, but I don't think I imagined it would be so long and drawn out. I figured I would make a mistake when entering a house and I'd take a bullet to the head, my death coming quick and virtually painlessly.

As I'm thrown without care into a small dark room, I have to wonder if I'd still take this path in life if I had the privilege of knowing this is how it would end.

One of the guys kicks me in the shoulder, muttering cuss words in Spanish before they turn and leave. I try my best to shift my weight in an attempt to find a more comfortable position to meet my maker in, but there's no comfort in any position.

Curling on my side hurts the least, so that's how I stay.

I should've asked questions when Angel told me about this job. I should've ignored the sense of brotherhood it gave me to say yes. Helping others who I have any fucking connection to only leads to trouble, something I've discovered more than once in my life, yet I keep fucking doing it. There isn't one bastard that has walked through the doors of the Mission Mercenaries office who would do the same for me. The brotherhood I imagined is just that, fantasy, and this time, it's going to get me killed.

Chapter 7

Ayla

“For you,” the man says, sitting on the side of the bed holding out two one-hundred-dollar bills.

“That’s not necessary,” I tell him as I reach for the money. “But thank you.”

Getting tipped for what boils down to sexual assault gives me fucking hives.

I fought this man, begged him to stop, because it’s what he wanted. It’s what he paid for. Tipping isn’t necessary, but Pirro would hurt me more than this man did if I turned down the money. It’s not that I get to keep it. The cash will be pocketed by someone else. We have no need for money.

Everything you’ll ever need is provided.

I’ve heard it too many times to count, as if human decency and a right to choose are too much to ask for because it’s never on the list of things given by these animals.

The man smiles, his lips curling up even higher when his eyes scan his handiwork. The bruises he left behind won’t take long to heal. He isn’t one of the men who hurts me as much as he probably could. How fucked up am I in the head to be grateful that this piece of shit only hurt me a little?

“I’ll be able to make my way back here in a few weeks,” he says, licking his lips. “I can’t wait to see you again.”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” I lie, the words burning in my throat, because attacking him would only lead to me receiving exactly what I deal out or more.

He nods, liking the way I step back as he stands to get dressed.

I don’t think he’s a bad man. I think he has a certain kink and this may be the only place he’s been able to find to satisfy it. I have very little doubt he knows that I’m not exactly as willing of a participant as he thinks.

Guys like him are few and far between. Most of the men who come here get hard just knowing that we've been abducted and are working against our will, despite the show we put on to meet the customer's needs.

I resist the urge to step closer and ask him for help. All it would earn the man is a bullet in his head before he walked out of the house. I've heard whispers of others trying it, for it to only lead to more punishment for both parties involved.

He winces as he pulls on his shirt but it quickly transforms into a knowing smile.

I wonder just how devious he is. If he knew that his rape fantasy was real, would he stop? Would it turn him on even more if he discovered that he was actually doing what he fantasized? If he knew my begging was real, that the scratches on his back were there because I was really fighting, would he keep going? Would he offer to help save me? Would he fuck me harder?

"Have a good night," I tell him as I walk toward the door instead of asking him any of those questions.

I hate men like him, but at the same time, being able to fight the men who hurt me is the only time I'm allowed to take any of the anger about my current situation in life out on anyone. It calms the voices inside of me that want to speak up in every other situation. It gives me back a little power, and some days, I think it's the only thing that keeps me going.

I don't startle at the sight of Pirro standing right outside the door. I nod one last time to the customer before closing the door behind me. My nemesis stands there, his hand out. Of course he was watching on camera, or maybe the guy has been here before and is a notorious tipper.

I drop the cash into his hand, praying that it's going to be a slow night and he'll tell me to go back to my room and wait for instruction.

Pirro smiles down at the cash. I know making him happy will ensure Alani's safety. Even with my body aching

from what just happened, it feels like a pretty even trade at the moment.

“I need you to shower and get down to room six,” he instructs, his hand wandering down my arm.

He bites at his lower lip when I whimper as he presses a rough finger into one of my fresh bruises. My first instinct is to jerk away, to make the pain stop, but doing so would only end up costing me more.

“Don’t take too long,” he says, releasing me and walking away.

In order to get to the room I’ve been given, I have to walk down one set of stairs, across the foyer and up another set of stairs that gets me there. I don’t know why I torture myself every damn day, but I lock my eyes on the front door as I walk past it. Every single time, I imagine opening the front door and sprinting away. Maybe it’s nature that has me reliving that fantasy a handful of times a day. I bet the damn thing isn’t even locked. Those of us who are allowed to walk alone in the house would never leave. Physical restraints aren’t what keep me here.

I want to sob as I climb the stairs leading to my room. I can feel my will slipping every single day, and I know that eventually I’ll cave. I’ll beg for death, even knowing what it means for Alani. There’s only so much someone can take before they’re so utterly broken that death is the only thing that will bring peace.

I don’t let my eyes roam as I pass each open room. Every door in this hallway has been removed. It’s a power play for the men who work here. We have no privacy because the door to the bathroom has been removed as well.

Nudity is no longer a concern for me as I walk through the house, which is saying a lot because I was always the one who people side-eyed in the dressing room at work because I’d carry my things into one of the bathroom stalls to change. As a nurse, I’ve seen more parts of people’s anatomies than I ever imagined I would before I started nursing school, but I wanted to keep my own modesty. I was never proud of the

pooch in my lower stomach I obtained in high school and fought so long to rid myself of it. It's gone now. The near-starvation diet the Cortez clan has all of us on took care of that within weeks. I'd give anything to get it back if it meant not going through this shit every day.

I never believed the *it could get worse* saying, but now I know, no matter how bad it is for me, it's always worse for others.

My mind drifts back to the man I stitched up last week. I haven't been sent to take care of any more of his wounds, so I can only conclude that he died from his injuries or infection.

My shower is quick because I've experienced the repercussions of taking too long, and after the first client of the night, I know I won't be able to handle much more violence.

My hair is still damp, but I'm not concerned about fixing it. Room six is one of the live recording rooms, and the men that pay top dollar for those aren't as picky as you'd think they would be. They won't care if my hair is wet or dry, up or down. They'll be staring at the most intimate parts of me.

I test myself as I walk back down the stairs, but I fail, my eyes once again going to the bronze doorknob as I walk past. My skin is covered with gooseflesh as I enter room six. I know it's due in equal parts to my anxiety as well as the cool temperature of the room.

The camera equipment puts off a lot of heat, so they keep the temps down. What do they fucking care if I'm freezing? If anything, the goosebumps make it look like I'm afraid. It adds to the thrill that the person paying for a scene is seeking.

I pause beside Pirro, waiting for instruction, and I fight looking at the man tied down to the table, as much as I did looking at the front door, and with this I also fail.

I hate that it's the same man I doctored, a mask covering most of his face. I hate the sight of his wounds, some of the stitching peeled away, his wounds oozing. It tells me that Pirro has once again worked him over. I'm torn between hoping the

monster has at least been giving him injections of antibiotics and thinking it would probably be better for the man if he wasn't being treated for the infections.

"It's a paid live," Pirro says, the finger of one hand tapping out a tempo only he can hear on his opposite forearm. It makes me wonder how many lines of cocaine he snorted while I was taking a shower.

"What's the theme?" I ask, rather than making the mistake of assuming just from looking at the setup.

"Male victim, female seductress," Pirro says, his eyes finding mine as if he's living for whatever reaction I may have. He hands me a mask. It's one I'm familiar with because I wear them often enough. It's more than likely at the request of the customer because these guys aren't concerned about my anonymity.

I've learned not to cringe, not to beg for a break. Pirro loves nothing more than forcing someone to do something they don't want. He lives for the moments he gets to prove he has more authority over everyone when Raul is gone.

"How far?" I ask, my eyes darting back to the man splayed out on the bed.

"Full fuck," he responds, and my rejection is on the tip of my tongue.

I've had to suck a guy off that didn't want it. When I did it to this man, he wasn't the first, but I've never had to fuck a guy that wasn't interested.

I've done all sorts of fetish shit. I've pretended to be asleep. I don't know how many times I've had to gag around calling someone daddy. I've been forced to eat pussy while the girl cried and begged me to stop, but never once have I had to have full blown sex with someone.

My hands are trembling as I nod, knowing he's just waiting for me to argue.

"What if he hurts me?"

Pirro looks from me to the man, before responding. “He’s tied down pretty good, and he’s pretty fucking worked over, but the more he fights, the better for the client. Pay attention to prompts.”

He steps out of the way so I can get closer to the man.

I hate that his eyes lock on to me the second I get within a few feet of the bed.

Instead of trying to calm his fears, I look toward the teleprompter so I know exactly what the customer wants. Everything in me is telling me to fight this, to try and run from the room. It’s a feeling that’s more familiar than it ever should be, because I’ve been expected to do so many fucking things that I’d never even consider if I were free and living my own life.

His eyes are heavy, but even if he passes out, neither of us can avoid this. His cock is thick, albeit not quite fully erect, and I know he’s been given some sort of drug to make him that way.

I know from experience that most men are willing and ready no matter what the situation is. But I highly doubt this man wants to get fucked while he’s covered in wounds, after having undoubtedly been tortured every single day since he arrived at the house.

He tenses as I climb on the bed, my throat working on a swallow as I obey the teleprompter.

START AT HIS CALVES AND LICK YOUR WAY UP HIS BODY.

I wish I could convey that the bile threatening to choke me and make me puke is more about what I’m being forced to do and has little to do with my disgust in him as a person.

Chapter 8

Nash

I try to lift my head to watch her as she makes her way up my body, but I don't have the strength. I don't even know if I could fight her if my arms and legs weren't strapped down.

I'd guess she's the same woman from the last time I had contact with someone other than Pirro and his goons, but I can't be a hundred percent sure because of the mask covering most of her face. Imagining there's more than one woman in the world as cruel and evil as that first woman makes my head spin, so I settle into the idea that this is the very same one who sucked me off on command and then treated my wounds.

I haven't been given much of a reprieve. It feels like I've been here for months already, not a handful of hours going past before Pirro is standing in front of me with a scalpel or some other device to hurt me with.

I'm freezing, my body trembling uncontrollably, every muscle aching more than I ever thought was possible. I've been in some pretty uncomfortable situations, but even combining all of those together wouldn't get close to how I feel now. Being poked, prodded, stabbed, and at one point, zapped with electrical charges, have made me weaker than I've ever been.

I attempt to press into her, not wanting her to touch me on any level, but desperate for the warmth her skin against mine brings.

They had to have given me fucking Viagra or some other fucking drug because my cock is responding to her in a way I'd never want if left to my own devices. I growl, the sounds I'm making as weak as my muscles feel.

Her lips are warm as they brush my skin, but each press of them leaves behind a wetness that has the power to chill me to the bone.

When she's near my face, I contemplate biting her fucking nose off, but the look in her eyes makes me freeze. I

can't fully understand, and maybe that's partly because my mind is a fucking mess right now, but there isn't taunting in her gaze. She looks no happier to be here than I am. Maybe my brain is seriously fucking with me. Maybe I'm seeing what I want to see, if only to make it easier on myself.

I shake my head as much as I can manage when she settles on top of me, the warmth of her cunt pressing against my length.

I swear I'll choke and die if she keeps it up because I'm going to fucking puke.

She leans forward as if she's going to kiss me, her lips brushing my jaw.

"They'll hurt us both if you don't fight me." Her words are lower than a whisper, and hard to fully decipher without my full concentration, which is impossible right now, considering everything I've been through.

There's pleading in her eyes when she stares down at me.

It leaves me torn. I want to fucking fight her because I hate what's fucking happening right now, but at the same time, she has to know that no matter what I do, I'm going to be hurt. Fighting her may ensure she's safe, but it means fucking nothing for me. When they unstrap me from this damn table, Pirro's going to pull that fucking knife out and start slicing away at my skin once again. I'm not fucking interested in helping this bitch out. If I'm going to be hurt, she can be hurt too.

I turn my eyes up, the ceiling of the room covered in too many lights to count.

I'm stubborn if anything, and I don't care about the sadness in her eyes. I doubt she was looking sad when she quietly sat to the side that first day when Pirro worked me over.

I'm considering dying just to spite her when pain radiates in my rib cage. My body instinctively tries to curl to the side. I watch as she looks away from me to some place

over my shoulder, her fingers still digging into the wound on my side.

When she looks down at me, I have full understanding. Fight her for them or she'll make me.

As stubborn as I can be, I've had enough pain to last several lifetimes.

Her chin quivers as she slips her hand between her legs, and I swear the woman looks like she's about to be sick.

I shake my head, trying to clear it of any sympathy threatening to form for her. I've not heard a single threat, witnessed anyone try and hurt her. She's as willing to do this as I am unwilling, despite her whispered plea in my ear.

I calm but it only lasts a second when I feel her fingers brush another wound.

I growl into the gag in my mouth, spitting every insult I can manage at her. It feels like defeat, giving her exactly what she's asking for, but my head is no longer controlling my body.

The same goes for my cock, and I hate the way it lifts from my stomach as if seeking her hand.

I try to roll my head away, but a soft yet harsh finger clamps my jaw, forcing me to face her. I clench my eyes shut, refusing the only thing I have power over right now.

She doesn't pull her fingers from my face as her other hand lines my cock up at her entrance.

It shouldn't feel good, the way her body engulfs me, but it doesn't stop the muffled groan from being absorbed into the gag lodged in my mouth.

She looks pissed when she curls forward, her face mere inches from mine. This bitch has the audacity to look mad when she's the one doing all this shit. I don't hear any barked commands from the other side of the room. She's doing this on her own, and I fucking hate her for it.

I try to dislodge her but it's impossible with the way they have me tied. Despite knowing I'll never succeed, I

continue to fight, each jerk of my body driving me deeper into her until I'm pressed to the root, the warmth of her body pressing against me from my upper thighs to my lower abdomen. The heat of her skin is nothing short of miraculous.

She shifts, the grip of her cunt pulling at my cock as she lifts. I want to cry when cool air wraps around my dick, proving just how slick she is, how fucking disgustingly turned on she is to be doing this to me.

A sound draws my attention, but I see nothing but more lights when I look to my right. Confused, I look up at her but she's staring past my head once again.

It seems like a millennium before she looks down at me, but time no longer has the same meaning for me.

"Fucking whore," I growl the second she pulls the gag from my mouth, but that same familiar but somehow also foreign sound echoes through the room over and over.

It hits me as hard as Pirro's fist did earlier today when I attempted to fight them when they came into the tiny cell they've been holding me in.

We're being recorded and someone is watching live. Every trill of that sound means the customer is fucking paying more money. It's a reward for doing exactly what he wants while he watches, no doubt stroking his cock and getting off.

I lock eyes with her, hating the sight of a tear shimmering on the bottom lash of her left eye. She hates this, possibly hates me as much as I hate her. She's playing a role.

They'll hurt us both if you don't fight me.

Her words make perfect fucking sense now.

The thought that I'm victimizing her as much as she is me makes my stomach turn. I haven't been fed much since being brought here, so there's no real threat of getting sick, but it doesn't stop the acid from pooling in my throat.

I jerk to the side, nearly unseating her, but when we lock eyes, she seems to understand that I've figured it out.

She lifts her hands, secretly swiping away the tear that was threatening to fall, before tangling her fingers in her wet hair.

She lifts and raises, spearing herself on my cock over and over. I hate that there's a little pleasure that seeps through all the other pain my body is feeling. I hate that my anatomy plans to take this from her despite my brain knowing it isn't something she wants.

I clench my fists and jaw, hating myself and everyone else in the entire world for the way my nuts draw up.

"Get the fuck off me, you fucking bitch," I growl, hating the *cha-ching* sounds echoing through the room.

It seems the pervert likes what he's watching, and it makes me wonder if she'll be mistreated more if the guy likes it, or if she'll be hurt if he doesn't.

Considering money always makes me happy, I decide on the former, using every ounce of energy I probably don't have to spare to try and dislodge her from my body.

All the fight leaves my body when she presses her palms to my chest, her ass lifting and swirling, my cock taking all she has to offer. It feels fucking amazing which is fucked up beyond words. The talent the woman has in her hips makes me sick to my stomach. It feels professional, like a mastered skill, and it makes me go right back to thinking she's fucking playing me, that she's a part of Pirro's fucking group.

After looking past me once again, she leans back, her palms on my thighs as she drags her slick pussy up my length, the angle feeling better than it ever should, considering the details of why this is happening.

I squeeze my eyes shut once again, trying to imagine she's some whore I picked up at the bar and brought back to my hotel room, but that doesn't work for me. I switch the fantasy to her being a paid hooker, one who's giving me exactly what I paid for but it doesn't fit either.

Relinquishing any sort of power during sex has never been my thing. I have never secretly wished that some bitch

would take over in the bedroom, and right now is no fucking different.

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” I threaten, my eyes finding hers once again. “The first chance I get, I’m going to wrap my fucking hands around your throat.”

I snap my mouth closed, my jaw tightening with the first tingle in my nuts.

“I swear it, whore. I’m going to fucking kill you.”

She shakes her head, her mouth hanging open when my body takes over, my hips lifting a fraction of an inch because it’s all I can manage.

Jesus, she’s going to make me fucking come, and there’s not a goddamned thing I can do about it.

I drop my eyes from her face, feeling incredibly disgusted with what’s happening and even more repulsed at what I know is coming, no pun intended.

I scream, the pain almost enough to make me pass out, when she once again digs her fingers into one of my wounds. At least she has the compassion to look upset that she’s hurting me.

My words may not have been a lie or a performance for the cameras. I just may kill this bitch given the chance.

Her mouth hangs open, sounds of pleasure coming from her lips, and it makes me freeze. Not because of what she’s doing but because of what she isn’t doing.

The *cha-ching* sound echoes through the room, a constant noise, but it doesn’t drown out the fake-as-fuck orgasm she’s playing out. Whoever the customer is clearly can’t tell, but he’s probably some sick fuck in his mom’s basement who’s never had a girl orgasm on his cock before.

The most fucked-up part of all of this is that it still makes me come. Her fake fucking orgasm makes my balls seize and my cock jerk inside of her.

We lock eyes, and I find relief in them, understanding that she’d have to stay up there until I finished because it’s

what the man on the other side of his computer wanted. It was the expectation for the prisoner to orgasm, despite wanting to slit the throat of the woman riding him.

She falls forward, the exertion from her faked release rushing past her lips on uneven bursts.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers just before her head lifts to once again look over my shoulder.

I understand that she’s apologizing, not only for what she’s previously done but for everything she’s going to do, as she slides down, my still half-erect cock slipping from her cum-soaked pussy.

Once again I find myself clenching my eyes closed as she licks down my body. I can feel the tremble in her hands now that I comprehend a little more about what’s going on.

I internalize that disgust, hating the way my body enjoys her touch even when I know it must repulse her. Her lips find the tip of my dick, and I swear I hear her swallow so hard the sound echoes louder than the money sound as she’s tipped heavily for cleaning my cock after fucking me without my consent.

I try my best not to have any response, but the warmth of her tongue on my nut sack makes me arch my head back. I consider that maybe I shouldn’t feel ashamed for how what she’s doing is making me feel. It’s the only good thing that I can recall, going even farther back than the night I walked into that bar Pirro was in and joined his poker game.

It hits me even harder that the shame can’t take a foothold, because I lie there and revel in the pleasure her mouth brings.

Chapter 9

Ayla

As much as I'd like to ignore the shadows that periodically pass in front of my door, I've been trained to look up, to meet the eyes of whoever it might be. I've learned what's expected with each one of the men. I know who to act afraid of, who to look excited for. I even know when to channel a combination of both when it's Pirro standing there. He's been distracted lately, keeping his playtime in other areas of the house. As thankful as I am for it, I know what it means for others. Today, I don't feel as guilty for the reprieve. I know that's a terrible thing, that I'm on some level of okay with someone else getting hurt because it means I'm saved from the pain if only for a little while.

I barely catch the back of the man walking by, too distracted and lost in my own thoughts to react as quickly as I should. Thankfully, the guy doesn't turn back around in an attempt to remind me exactly who I am and what's expected of me.

For the millionth time since being brought here, I map the lines on the palm of my hand, thinking of how fucked up it is that I'm bored. I don't for a second wish to be entertained or busy because of what that means in a place like this, but it isn't often that I'm left with time of my own that isn't spent sleeping.

It's not that I couldn't fall asleep right now. I think I could sleep standing up most days, but we aren't allowed to during what Cortez considers business hours, which are from noon to six in the morning. If we have a client that goes past that time, then we just lose those hours of sleep.

I nod at a man they call Rune as he passes. The man has never hurt me. He's never forced me to do anything with him, but I know better than to make the assumption that he isn't capable of it. I find it insanely unlikely that someone can work here, witnessing what others do, and not be just as demented.

If they had a problem, they'd speak up or find a different type of job.

I breathe a sigh of relief when he simply nods before moving further down the hallway.

The next shadow takes my breath away. It isn't often that Raul Cortez makes his way down to this end of the house. I know when the man is present on the property with the way Pirro acts, because he's insanely more violent and terrorizing when the man is gone.

Without a word, he enters my room, holding out the burner phone to me.

Slowly, I reach for it, knowing he has all the power and can jerk it out of my grasp anytime he'd like.

It's warm in my hand, making me think someone else was using it but *DON'T FORGET* is the only contact listed like normal.

I lift the phone, holding it to my ear as I count the rings. My heart pounds as each ring goes unanswered. Alani is like any typical youngest child. She's the baby, the one that expects to be catered to, and it wouldn't surprise me after hanging up on me last week, that she's using this week to punish me.

When the call switches to voicemail, I do my best not to cry but I can feel the tremble in my chin.

"Hey, Alani. It's me," I say, avoiding eye contact with Raul. "Just checking in. Guess I'll try again next week."

A sinking fear settles inside of me as I end the call and hand the phone over. There was only one other time she didn't answer my call, and it left me terrified for an entire week that she'd been taken. I can't even describe the relief I felt when she picked up the following week.

Before Raul takes it, *DON'T FORGET* pops up on the screen, the thing vibrating in my hand. I know better than to answer it, and Raul simply silences it before putting it back into his pocket.

He's never been an intentionally cruel man, considering what he does for a living, but it also doesn't mean the man doesn't take what he wants. He's what I'd consider a vanilla fuck, but he's too busy really to waste time giving into any sort of fetish or fantasy. It's a lot of work, I imagine, counting all the millions I have no doubt he's making by abducting people and selling them into sexual slavery.

"I wanted to commend you for such a good job yesterday. The customer was incredibly happy."

Translation—he made a lot of money from the scene I performed with that man.

I want nothing more than to look away from him, but I know better. He'd see it as disrespectful, and although he doesn't go out of his way to hurt people, he doesn't avoid reminding us of his expectations.

"I'd say I'm surprised how much people talk about their depraved participation, but he must be chatting to like-minded others. The books are filling up with very similar requests. It's like a brand-new market for male victims and female assailants."

His words make my skin crawl. Before being abducted, I always knew there were sickos in the world. Hell, anyone who has a television can't escape the horrific stories on the news and the documentaries. But coming face-to-face with it on a daily basis, really opened my eyes up to just how many people like that exist. Hell, Raul has built his business on perverts. He seems to be doing extremely well for himself, but that would be expected, considering his limited overhead since we've all been fucking abducted.

"I don't think the demand will ever overtake the need for women to be hurt, but the change of pace is a breath of fresh air."

His eyes skate over my body, and as much as I want to cover my exposed skin, I fight the urge.

"We have another special order scheduled for later this week."

I barely stop myself from scrunching my nose in disgust.

“The same customer wants to see the opposite, with you tied to the bed.” He looks down at his fingernails as if he’s bored with revealing that I’ll once again be assaulted, like he’d tell someone he had a package delivered to an alternate address.

“Do you still have any fight left in you?” he asks, his eyes lifting to look directly into mine. It isn’t a taunt or a tease. The man is well aware of what he’s created. He knows I’m going to do what’s expected of me, but he also has to consider how it will look for the customer. Pretending to fight and really fighting are two very different things, and there aren’t many people who like playing with a broken toy.

“This client is very prestigious in certain circles,” he continues before I can answer. “If the performance is just right, then it’s very good news for me.”

He didn’t have to make the threat of the opposite if it isn’t up to expectations. I already know how bad he can make my life, and I feel queasy, knowing that as bad as things are for me, there are people here who have it much worse. I hate being grateful for what little crumbs of civility they offer me, and more so, I hate the way I fucking eat them up, ready to ask for more if that’s what they want of me.

Good news for him means more money, more clients, more people whispering about how incredible he is. I swear the man would suck his own dick as a reward if he was capable.

Having a good performance, and getting more clients, also means more men and women will be hurt. They’ll need to increase production, and none of it will be done with consent.

I want to ask which of his men will play the male role, but I know better. I wish I could request anyone but Pirro because he’s the most volatile. He’s the one most likely to leave the worst injuries behind when he’s done. Raul would see it as questioning his authority, something he never hesitates to affirm.

“I’ll fight,” I assure him, giving him a weak smile if anything to keep from crying.

Refusing, or telling him I don’t have the energy any longer to give him what he wants, isn’t an option, and I don’t do it to save someone else the pain. I can only look out for myself, and hope my efforts protect Alani.

I can only hope the guy who is cast as my attacker will simply fuck me, maybe slap me in the face a time or two, rather than cutting me or biting away pieces of my flesh. The long-healed wound on my shoulder itches with the thought.

“I knew you still had it in you,” he says, in a way that would be almost fatherly if it weren’t for the context of our conversation.

Before he can walk away, the phone in his pocket begins to vibrate. My heart rate doubles because I know it has to be Alani calling back, again. I plead with the man, hoping the look in my eyes is enough to give me what I want.

He lifts his head only an inch, but I fully understand what he’s trying to convey. He holds every ounce of power. This entire organization is his to command, and that includes me.

He pulls the phone from his pocket, showing me that *DON’T FORGET* is lighting up the screen. For a split second, I consider how cruel the man could be, but instead of silencing it and shoving it back into his pocket, he hands it over.

I reach for it, my heart breaking when he connects the call and places it to his ear, issuing a greeting in Spanish as he answers it.

Knowing my sister hears his voice makes my skin crawl. It feels like a violation, despite the hundreds of miles that separate the two of them.

He nods as he listens to her, a smile I want to scratch from his face pulling up the corners of his mouth as he speaks in broken English, as if the man isn’t as fluent in the language as I am.

There's a glimmer of pride in his voice when he pulls the phone from his face and hands it back in my direction. He can see the fear in my eyes, and I know instantly it's what he was searching for.

I don't even have to pretend I'm breathless when I press the phone to my ear.

"Alani?"

"Is that man your boyfriend? Is he what's keeping you away for so long?"

I want to break down and cry, wondering how many confessions I could get out before he rips the phone from my hand.

"He's not my boyfriend."

"So you just happen to be standing right beside him when he answers the pay phone?"

She hasn't questioned me much over the last couple of months. I owe that to always having been honest with her before my abduction, even when it meant hurting her feelings or telling her something she would never want to hear. Like the night our parents died, and I had to pick her up from a friend's house with the bad news that our lives were changed forever.

"I was waiting in line. Figured I'd try one more time before going back to camp."

She makes a sound that says she understands and that she thinks I'm full of shit.

I pray she settles on believing the lie. The last thing I need her doing is asking questions I can't answer or, worse yet, trying to figure out exactly where I am.

"I'm still mad at you," she says. "I only called back because I need to know about Christmas."

My throat clogs, something that I've done pretty good at controlling on each of our calls. But knowing I'm going to miss seeing her for the holiday hits me differently than all the

other things I've missed since I've been here. Inside, I swim with guilt as if this is something I can control.

"I'm not going to make it," I whisper, hating that Raul is standing so close and witnessing my pain. It makes it harder to hide.

I clear my throat even as she sniffles.

"I knew going to college would be hard, but I always figured I had a home to go back to."

I want to remind her that we had to sell our childhood home so I could afford to send her to college. The one-bedroom apartment in Plano wasn't home, despite my efforts to make it as warm and welcoming as possible. It still left me sleeping on the couch, because as a teen girl, she needed more privacy than I did as a nurse with wild and crazy hours. I never even got the chance to sleep in the bedroom rather than on the couch because I was taken from her college dorm parking lot.

I meet Raul's eyes, wishing things were different, but I know he just wouldn't release me if he could hear the pain in my sister's voice. The suffering of others doesn't register to this man. If they did, he wouldn't be as rich and as successful as he is.

"How was your English test?" I ask, changing the subject.

I've lied to her so much that I'm not going to keep doing it when I can help it. I can't promise her that she'll have a home to come to when summer arrives. The only way I'll ever see my sister again is if Raul or one of his lackeys grabs her from campus and brings her here.

And knowing that, it's easy for me to wish I never see her again, for both our sakes.

Chapter 10

Nash

I hate his eyes on me. I hate the way they skate over every inch of my skin, cataloging the damage he's caused. I don't doubt Pirro is looking for fresh skin, unmarked places that he can hurt. The sadistic fuck takes so much pleasure in hurting others, I have to wonder if he'd do exactly this if I hadn't sat across from him almost nightly while he cheated to get every penny of my money. He probably would. What he does seems just as impersonal as it does personal, and honestly, that makes no fucking sense.

Just like it doesn't make sense that he's just standing there, watching me, when he normally threatens me or comes into the cell to kick me or cut me.

Another man comes in, tossing a bottle of water in my direction. I'm too slow in reacting to catch it in time before it hits then bounces off my chest. I don't hesitate to reach for it, less concerned than I should be that I'm not the first one to break the seal on the fucking thing. I guzzle the water, the bottle crinkling in my hand as I pull it away empty, a gasp on my lips for the effort it took to simply fucking drink.

I swallow repeatedly, trying not to get sick as the liquid threatens to roll right back up my throat.

More than one guy laughs as I tilt my face to the ceiling in an effort to keep from puking.

"Catch," someone says, but he throws something else that I'm too slow to catch.

The bag makes a crinkling noise when it falls in front of me.

I could cry at the sight of the fucking sandwich, and it only proves just how fucking desperate I am for normal fucking things.

The scent of peanut butter reaches my nose the second I pull open the baggie, and despite the grape jelly on there,

being the most disgusting flavor of all time, I lift the fucking thing to my mouth, unable to savor the taste as I all but inhale the damn thing.

Another round of chuckles echoes through the small room when I lift the baggie and upend it over my mouth, wanting every fucking crumb I can manage.

I have no idea how long I've been here. It seems like years, but if that were the case, I'd be dead. They've only fed me eleven times, counting this sandwich. I'm not a fucking nutritionist, but I doubt a man can live for that long on so little food.

"You're going to fuck one of the girls today," Pirro says, a wicked smile on his face when I lock eyes with him.

"I won't," I argue.

There's a lot I'll fucking do to survive, but rape isn't one of them.

"Do you have any idea what was in that fucking bottle of water?" the other man in the room asks.

"I was hoping rat poison," I answer honestly.

Pirro doesn't look impressed with my answer, and I know it probably kills him not to pull his boot back and kick me in the face.

"Enough Viagra to give you a week-long erection," the man counters.

"I can have a fucking erection and not use it to fuck someone, you ignorant fuck," I growl.

"We'll see about that," Pirro says, taking a step back as if he might honestly be afraid of me for a split second, regardless of how weak they've kept me.

If I thought for a second I could snap both their necks before they got the better of me, I would've lunged the second they opened the fucking door.

"You can fuck her with your cock, or I can fuck her with my knife," Pirro threatens, as easily as if he'd just asked for

lemon in his water at lunch.

Two men I didn't notice file into the room, each of them rushing to one side of me. In a flash, I'm pulled to my feet, Pirro closing the distance between us now that he has more help.

His breath is warm, tinged with tequila and cigarette smoke as he inches closer.

"I guess you have a decision to make," he says before stepping back. "I'm thinking it'll be more fun if you refuse."

My sandwich threatens to make a reappearance when he grips my soft cock in his hand.

"This cock is going to make us a lot more money," he says before releasing me and walking out of the room. "Get him cleaned up and on set."

The men drag me from the room, the fight in me almost nonexistent until I see them carrying me across the hall. I've suffered so much fucking pain in the room they plan to take me into that I can't even fight the instinct to try and escape.

It doesn't take much for them to wrestle me into the room. I'm grateful they have me chained once again with my arms over my head so quickly that I haven't yet been able to beg to be released. Begging is the very last thing I want to do, but I don't know how much longer I can resist the urge.

They step away, one guy heading for the water hose wound up on the wall. I'm trembling before he even turns the knob.

I'm blasted with frigid water, hating that I think of the woman from that very first day. I know now there was care in her touch, despite the freezing water she washed me with. She didn't try to hurt me. Despite her silence, she didn't seem like she enjoyed what she was doing. Hindsight is always clearer, and I now know that her touch was softer than anything else I've experienced since being here.

My teeth are chattering by the time the water is turned off. Several of my wounds are now seeping again, the pressure from the spray opening them up once again.

They don't grab towels, rather they let me hang there to dry as they laugh and watch fucking videos on a phone they are both looking down at.

I know the reason for the wait. I feel the reason starting to take over my body, and I fucking hate them even more for it.

They needed time for the shit they put in the water to take effect, and goddamn them if it isn't happening.

I don't know how many times I've wished for death, how many times I've reached out to whatever higher being that may be floating around that he just let me die. Right now is no different, especially knowing what I'll have to do.

I startle when hands touch me, hating that I'm so weak that my body just fucking randomly shuts down.

"Ready for a little fun?" one guy asks, his eyes darting between my legs.

I don't have to look to check and see if the drugs are working. I can feel the weight of it hanging from me, an insistent ache I can't help but focus on.

The trip to wherever they're taking me is filled with more aches and pains as we climb one set of stairs.

"Are you fucking serious?" a guy walking past asks as he points at me. "Let Pirro see that motherfucker without a blindfold. It'll be both your asses."

One of the guys spits a curse before pulling the blindfold I'm obviously supposed to be wearing from his back pocket. I don't bother arguing when he lifts it to my face. It's not a battle I can win, so what's the point in wasting the energy?

I'm carted up another flight of stairs, the blindfold not being pulled off until I'm shuffled into a room, the door shut swiftly behind me.

I'm fairly certain it's the same room I was brought in before, but since they were quick to cover my eyes before and

right after the scene was over, I can't be a hundred percent sure.

A row of cameras stand sentry in front of me, as Pirro looks down at my growing cock, victory in his eyes.

I use the time to look around the room, noticing the microphones suspended from the bed. There are lights and those shiny fucking things that I know direct the glares and shit, but have no idea what they're called, scattered throughout the area.

The bed is staged, having a fucking disgusting, rustic, decrepit feel to it, but from this side, taking in the entire area. I have no doubt the cameraman will have the ability to make it look exactly like whatever the client is requesting, the sick fuck that he is.

Several cameras are all pointed toward the bed, capable of catching every fucking angle of what they think they can force me to do.

A storyboard hangs on one wall, next to a blank teleprompter, proving me right about where the woman's eyes were drawn to the last time I was in here.

I can't look at the bed, and I hate myself more than a little for how the memory of that woman riding me and acting out whatever commands she was given is affecting me right now. I blame the fucking drugs in my system, wanting nothing more than to slit the throat of every fucking person in this room.

Pirro is just letting me take in my fill, but the woman he threatened to make me fuck isn't on the bed, and I don't see another female in the room.

Doom settles in my gut as I consider all the fucking options at these men's disposal, hating that I know there are ways they could fucking hurt me that I haven't experienced yet. It isn't the first time I've thought about it, considering what they're into, but the thought now makes my skin crawl.

I feel like the biggest piece of shit that has ever walked the earth because I know what I would choose if I were given

the option to be hurt that way or hurt someone else that way. It speaks fucking volumes as to how much of a goddamned violation it is.

I open my mouth to beg for death when the door opens.

It's the first time I'm seeing her completely as she enters the room unescorted.

"There's our star," Pirro says, and I watch as she manages half a smile.

She's no more impressed to be here than I am, but she's also not fighting them either. The contradiction confuses the fuck out of me, but I also know it doesn't take much these days after hours of torture and being starved for however long I've been here.

She nods to each of the men before walking over to the bed. She doesn't even falter as she climbs onto the thing, holding her arms out and spreading her legs as two men walk to either side of the bed and strap her arms down.

She doesn't make a sound, not a chuckle or whimper of distress when one of the men twists her nipple harshly.

Her throat works on a swallow, a strand of her blond hair resting there. Her blue eyes are pointed at the ceiling. I watch as she goes from what appears to be calm and collected to her chest heaving, tears running down her temples until they disappear into her hairline.

I let my eyes sweep the length of her, unsure of what I'm witnessing and completely fucking confused by all of it.

I don't know if the bruises, cuts, scratches, and scars marring her skin are real or just another prop for the fucking movie we're clearly about to make.

"Here," Pirro snaps as he presses something into my chest.

I wince from the pain it causes, looking down at the dark mask.

"The customer wants to imagine it's him, not you, fucking her."

I take the fucking thing, but before I can say a word, it's snatched out of my hand by one of the other guys. I glare at my nemesis as the mask is tied on my fucking face.

"I won't fuck her."

"You will," he argues, smiling when I start to shake my head. "You'll fuck her and make it look good, or the scene will turn into a fucking snuff film."

I freeze, my spine stiffening as much as capable, wondering if they also gave me a goddamned pain pill because there's a numbness to my wounds, a kind of relief I haven't felt until now. Maybe it's the acceptance of what will happen to me today.

Pirro inches closer. "And before you spit out some stupid shit, know it will be her life you're sacrificing, not your own."

Mother. Fucker.

Chapter 11

Ayla

This isn't the first time I've been tied down, knowing what's coming, but despite understanding my fate, it still doesn't keep my heart from racing the second I'm restrained. Raul wanted to know about the fight left in me. He was worried I couldn't sell my fear. He shouldn't be concerned.

It's moments like these that I actually get to be exactly who I am.

I don't have to draw on sad childhood memories for the tears to start flowing. My childhood was amazing. Until I lost my parents, I really had nothing to complain about.

The jump in my heart rate is a product of understanding what's coming, not because I'm psyching myself up any other way.

Even though I know he's being forced to do this as much as I am, I still hate the man standing beside Pirro. I can't explain the double standard. Maybe it's a holdover from entitled views I had before being abducted; the ones that said men were supposed to be chivalrous like my father had always been. That man would've sacrificed all he had for my mom, Alani, and me.

The man standing on the other side of the room may have something just as valuable to lose as I do, but deep down, I have this fucked-up idea that he should forfeit whatever it is rather than doing what he's expected.

Turning my head, I watch as he and Pirro speak. I can see the hatred the man has for Pirro, but I also know how this ends. Even if the man refused, someone would still step up to make the video. They'd never let the promised money from the client slip away.

I try to plead with my eyes, telling the man it's best if he just agrees. I'm still going to be hurt today, and I rather get it over with than have to watch him die before it happens.

Looking back up at the ceiling, I draw in deep breaths, but it doesn't calm my racing heart. It doesn't stanch the tears already streaming down my face.

Not that it's ever been my thing, but I fully understand having a kink that includes being tied down. The whole consensual non-consent isn't all that surprising, and honestly, even facing what I am, I'd never judge someone for having a rape fantasy. To each their own and all that, but this goes beyond that. This isn't fantasy, and I think that's the appeal to whoever paid for this scene. I have no doubt the man with the cash on the other side of the video connection knows this is real on some level.

The number of people who pay to watch shit like this is unreal. I'm fairly certain those with just the fantasy are the ones watching prerecorded videos and getting off to those. The ones paying for a live action scene are the real monsters.

I test the strength of my restraints once again, knowing all it's going to do is upset me even more. There's no escape for me right now just like there's no escape for me later, no matter how close I walk to the front door.

I fight the urge to look back over at him, but I know the effort is wasted. I watch as he's handed his mask. The scowl on his face is something new. As many times as I've done this, it's never been by someone other than one of the employees. They never have to be convinced to participate. They're always so very eager, considering this is one of the perks of their jobs. They get as excited to hurt women as one might be to find out their medical insurance is paid for by the organization. It's fucking disgusting.

I don't know what Pirro tells the man, but I know the second he makes up his mind. As much as I despise him for it, I'm also grateful to get this shit started so it can end just as quickly.

I pull my eyes away when he starts to walk closer, knowing they had to have given him something to cause the erection bobbing at the center of his body. His injuries, the dozens of cuts to his skin, are too extensive for the man to

actually get horny on his own. It also means that it'll take him longer to come, giving him more time to hurt me and extending the clients tipping window, but whatever makes Raul Cortez more money, right?

I chance a final glance in his direction, wanting to claw at his skin, my hands forming fists even though I'm tied down at the wrists.

"Not yet," Pirro growls, his voice echoing through the room. "Client isn't fucking online yet."

The man freezes, his back to the main camera, but I know other cameras are capturing the looks on both of our faces.

I try to beg him with my eyes, wanting him to be better, wanting him to refuse even though I know the day ends the same way for me. I want proof that some people still have an ounce of humanity in them.

"I'm going to fuck you until you scream, bitch."

I jerk at the digital voice echoing around the room. It takes me a long moment to register that the fucking client is going to be the one to dictate what happens in here. Just the thought of it makes it more of a violation than I originally considered it to be.

The man's jaw clenches, his hands tight fists at his sides. I don't know how to read the way he rolls his neck on his shoulders, a popping sound meeting my ears as he cracks his neck. Is this the way he would prepare for a fight? Is he still on the fence about his level of participation?

He looks to the side, and I know that Pirro is still sending cues on the teleprompter for him, because whatever he sees makes him take a step forward.

"Please don't," I beg, and the man actually falters.

"Going to fuck you bloody." It's only the second time he's spoken, but I want to call the client a complete pussy for having his voice altered in an effort to avoid being identified. If he's brazen enough to pay to have people hurt each other, he

should at least have enough balls to do it with his real fucking voice.

“Look how scared you are. I could come just watching your ragged breaths and the way they make your tits rise and fall. Too bad I’m going to leave bruises all over these perfect tits. They feel so good in my hands.”

The man stands on the side of the bed, frozen, the blank look on his face telling me that he’s not really seeing me. He’s distant, lost somewhere in his head, as if disassociating from this entire event.

“They feel so good in my fucking hands,” the client growls, repeating his prompt.

I open my mouth to beg him to just do what the fuck he’s told, but I hear the sound of a gun being cocked. It makes my entire body tremble, my head working out the scenario of him being shot and how the blood will coat my skin. It wouldn’t stop the next guy from stepping up and following through.

I jerk another plea on my lips when a cold hand rises to my left breast.

The man still isn’t looking at me, despite his grip on my skin.

Sympathy for him swims in my gut, but no matter how hard I try to shake the feeling, I just can’t get it to release me from its clutches. I can’t think of anyone but Alani, and the fact that he somehow has the ability to make me lose focus, angers the hell out of me.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” I rage, jerking against the ropes at my wrists.

Fire runs up my arms, and I don’t have to look to know I’ve caused my own injuries.

His eyes snap down to mine.

“You sick fuck. Get your hands off me.”

I want to puke at the sound of the *cha-chings* echoing around the room. I hate that the fucking client likes how I’ve

acted.

“I’m going to fuck the fight right out of you, little girl.”

I force the bile down once again, swallowing against the burn in my throat as heavy breathing fills the room along with the unmistakable sound of someone masturbating.

A growl draws my attention back to the man, my eyes following him as he circles to the end of the bed, more than likely another prompt on the screen hanging across the room.

I know this guy isn’t a monster. Well, I’d gamble he isn’t a monster in the way they’re making him into one, but he’s still going to be one of the many monsters in my life.

I lift my leg, ready to kick him in the face as he climbs on the bed, but he clamps his palm against my shin. I freeze, noting the tremble in his touch. He’s weak, and with the extent of his injuries, it’s expected. I could probably kick him off if I really tried, but there’s a pleading in his eyes I just can’t get past. It’s an apology and a bid for forgiveness all in one.

His throat works on a swallow, telling me there’s a very real chance he’s trying not to gag as hard as I am.

“Get your fucking hand off me,” I spit, but only jerk my leg a little, enough to let the client see the fight, but not enough to actually dislodge him.

His jaw clenches once again, telling me that he’s well aware that I’m not putting in the full effort. He doesn’t seem happy about it at all.

“Spread your fucking legs like the whore you are.”

The man at my feet stiffens with the implied command given to him, but he presses his other hand to my right leg. I have to look away as I comply. I know he’s being forced. I know his erection is chemically induced. I’ve been where he is, most recently, only a couple of days ago when he was the one tied to the bed.

Knowing all of that doesn’t make it any easier.

I jerk, my chin quivering, when I feel the brush of his fingers at the center of my body.

He pulls back, forcing me to look down at him. Jesus, if he breaks character and the client is pissed, we'll both be punished.

I watch as he rubs his thumb against his index and middle finger, wanting to explain the slickness on them, but I can't.

Fighting is all I'm supposed to do. I can't tell him that I used bottled lubrication because I didn't want to end up more injured than I had to be. I knew what was going to happen in here. Just like I know that this probably won't be the only time I'm used tonight. Suffering extra pain doesn't hurt anyone but myself. Telling Pirro I'm too sore to do what he asks will only make him mad. There's no compassion where that man is concerned.

The man looks utterly disgusted, as if he made some very wrong assumptions about me.

For the first time since being brought here, I want to cry because of how someone perceives me rather than feel shame for not being strong enough to tell them no, even after they threaten Alani.

"You slick fucking whore," the client growls. "I knew you fucking wanted this."

He wipes his fingers on my inner thigh as if he's beyond disgusted with what he found. He shifts his knees, walking further up the bed to settle between my thighs.

His eyes dart away, looking in Pirro's direction rather than the teleprompter. I don't know what he sees, but he looks like a broken man when he faces me again.

My lip trembles, every cell in my being wanting to tell him I understand.

"I fucking hate you," I spit instead.

I'm so sorry, he mouths.

The uncontrollable tremble starts in my chest, making its way out to the tips of my fingers. I don't know if I'll ever be able to get warm again.

Chapter 12

Nash

I know that death would be better than this.

Even years facing the same torture Pirro has so eagerly handed out since being brought here would be better. If given the option, it's what I'd choose.

I look toward Pirro, the smug bastard grinning at me, taking as much joy in watching me struggle with this as he did using a fucking scalpel to carve up my body.

It took more than one threat to even inch closer to her. His last words *hurt her a little or I'll hurt her a lot*, is what finally got me moving.

The look in her eyes told me she was willing to die, possibly begging for it, but of course Pirro could see it as well. Her death wouldn't be quick, and as much as I know she's going to hate this, I have to consider how much she'd really hate the other option.

Pirro tilts his head toward the screen. I drag my eyes in that direction, hating the urge to press closer to her if only for the warmth her skin provides.

STOP AND SHE DIES.

The sick bastard even managed to make the letters red as if mimicking the blood we'll both shed.

"I fucking hate you," she seethes, and I wish there was a way to make her understand that no one can hate me more than I hate myself.

If I thought for a second that Pirro would put a bullet in my head before killing her, I might take the chance, but I know the sick bastard will make me watch if not make me participate in her demise. I'm just not strong enough to do it.

I'm so sorry, I mouth, not giving a shit if the fucking customer sees or not.

Tears are a steady stream from her eyes, and the quiver in her chin is enough to break me.

Fuck her real hard and she'll come on your cock.

Pirro said that to me as I walked toward her, and at the time, it disgusted me. I'm torn between giving her body something, even knowing how much it will fuck with her mind, but maybe it's better than just being another assailant on her list of many.

I don't want to be just one more person haunting her dreams, but I see no way to avoid it.

She gives me the slightest, almost unnoticeable nod of her head, and I know it's the only permission I'll get. It's more about accepting our fates than anything else.

I brush my fingers up the center of her once again, now somehow understanding exactly what it is.

The woman isn't aroused. She doesn't want any part of this. What she's done is accepted her fate because the alternative must be unimaginable. That's why she's used artificial lube. She knows her body wouldn't slicken to make this easier on her.

It makes me hate Pirro and whoever the fuck he's working for even more.

She pulls her eyes from me when I slide two fingers inside of her, and I'm thankful for the reprieve.

"Used up fucking cunt," the guy paying for this depravity spits. "Probably too fucking loose to get me off."

The man couldn't be any further from the truth, and I hate the way my body responds to the grip of her pussy on my fingers.

She jerks her head in my direction when I brush my thumb over her clit. I imagine the zing of pleasure she felt is just as fucking nauseating as the one I felt the last time we were together.

I have to wonder, as I circle my thumb again, if it's the manipulation of doing something that was once pleasurable at

such a fucking awful time that angers her the most like it did me.

“Make sure you scream, bitch.”

I try my best to drown out the fucking voice filling the room as I pull my fingers from her body, the shake in my muscles even more pronounced as I spread my thighs a few inches wider in order to line myself up.

I have to look away when I swipe the tip of myself against the slickness coating her skin. It feels better than it should, considering what I’m fucking doing, but maybe that’s my penance, the guilt I’ll feel later.

“Get the fuck off me,” she screams, no lies in her tone as she struggles against her restraints. Red coats her wrists where the ropes have rubbed her to the point of bleeding.

Her knees lift, her feet planting on the bed in an effort to move her hips so I can’t penetrate her. I can’t help but focus on the wounds, hating that she’s hurting herself. I want all the blame to be on me. I don’t want her to suffer at all, but hurting herself this way enrages me.

I lean forward, my palm flat against her throat, my grip tightening in warning when she continues to fight.

Her eyes snap to mine, and I fucking hope she can see just how fucking sorry I am for being forced to do this.

“Calm the fuck down.”

Those words are mine, not the man paying for the perversion he’s living out through my actions.

She swallows, the flex of her throat right under my palm.

Money being made; the sound of Cortez’s coffers being filled, reverberates around the room, and I hate that it forms some sort of bond between the sick fuck paying for this and myself. He likes how I acted. His tipping means I’m doing exactly what he wants to do.

It makes me fucking sick, a literal wave of queasiness making its way through my body.

She must hate it too, because she continues her attempt to get away from me, despite knowing she'd never be able to.

“Stop!” I hiss, leaning in even closer. “It’s my fucking job to hurt you. Stop hurting yourself.”

She freezes under my touch, her eyes locking on mine. I feel some of the tension leave her body. I hate to think she sees me as an animal, but I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her from drawing more blood to the surface of her wrists.

I shift, my cock more than a little skilled at finding the right spot with very little help.

I clench my jaw the second my tip slips inside of her, my fingers at her throat tightening of their own volition.

When she coughs, I have to remind myself that the pressure there is now for show rather than being the need for a constant warning.

I fight the urge to puke as I press forward, burying myself inside her. I hate myself for the pleasure I feel, knowing it has nothing to do with the warning Pirro gave me.

Make it look like you like it or there will be consequences. Don't just get in and get out. The customer will know if you don't come. He's going to ask for proof. Don't say a word. The client is the one fucking her. Not you.

Seems I broke that last rule, but the amount of tips that came through tells me that he wasn't exactly angry about it.

“Gonna fuck you so hard you bleed.”

I snap my hips forward, moving my hand to her shoulder to hold her in place. If I have to take her the way it's implied in order to protect her, I will. What I don't want is to fuck her up the bed and cause more pressure on the wounds on her wrists.

“You sick bitch,” the client growls, the sickening sound of his hands working his own cock filling the room. “I bet you fucking like it. You like getting fucked like the whore you are, don't you?”

Our eyes are locked. She's not willing to let me look away, to imagine that this is consensual. I have no way to tell her that I wouldn't even if I could. We'll both have to suffer. I refuse to let her do it alone.

I can't believe I let myself think she was a willing participant in all of this. She's as much a prisoner as I am.

But then she lifts her legs, knees pressing into my sides in a way that doesn't exactly translate as wanting me to stop. I shake my head, thinking that I'm allowing my mind to create scenarios that make what I'm doing okay. It doesn't matter that I'm hitting her right in that spot that will make her come. She still doesn't want this, and I need to never forget that.

I release her throat, gripping her breast when the command echoes through the room. I do the same, obeying, when the client mentions spreading her so wide her legs must ache.

"Please stop," she begs, her words accompanying the warning clench her pussy gives me.

I wanted this. I wanted to make her come, but now it feels like the most sick and sadistic consolation prize I could ever offer someone.

I back off, shifting my hips to reposition my cock.

"Don't," she snaps, and I can't tell if she means for me to make her come or if she's fucking begging me not to.

I lift my eyes from where we're joined to hers, and the slightest nod of her head answers the question, her mouth dropping open when I press forward into that same spot. She squeezes her eyes closed, no doubt fighting that very same urge I tried to fight when she was on top of me.

I can't count how many times I've pulled a trigger, how many times I've used a blade to get my point across. I've used my hands to choke the life out of someone. Never hesitated to stomp my boot into someone's face, but I've never used my cock as the weapon it's being used as today.

"Take it bitch."

The voice makes my hips shudder, the pure ire in the man's voice making my skin crawl. I have no doubt the man has hurt many women in his life. I bet he feels more powerful now, being able to command someone else to do it, than he ever has.

"Please stop," she begs, her words drowning in the sobs she can't seem to control.

I know she really wants me to stop. She doesn't want to feel what she does. This isn't going to end with her coming and thanking me for making it happen. I know she's not in physical pain. The slippery wetness from the lube she used has transformed into the thick slickness of genuine arousal, and I know all about the hate she feels for herself because of it.

I'm suffering the same, teetering on the edge of self-loathing, for just how fucking amazing her body feels as I slam into her over and over. I hate knowing that Pirro was right. That fucking her hard will make her come. I hate that the man probably knows from firsthand experience. It makes me want to slit his fucking throat more now than ever.

As if a switch has been flipped, she settles, her sobs too quiet to hear over my own heavy breathing. Her chest is still heaving, tears are still rolling down her face, but I've just witnessed the moment she has given up, and I hate her a little for it. She's supposed to keep fighting. She's not supposed to let them witness breaking her.

When she turns her head to the side, I'm moving before the client can even spit disapproval for her looking away.

I clamp her jaw, forcing her eyes in my direction. She pleads without words, but I just can't give her what she's asking. I don't think she knows what the outcome for both of us would be if I listened to her and stopped. Maybe she knows exactly what would happen, and that's exactly why she has surrendered to her fate.

"I'll slit your fucking throat if you don't watch."

The threat, even knowing that the client is probably hundreds if not thousands of miles away, makes me grip the

back of her neck, angling her head so she can see me pistoning inside of her.

“Gonna fill this fucking pussy with my cum.”

Her neck is angled so she can watch us, but she lifts her eyes to mine. I'll live in the guilt at the way it ignites a spark inside of me, at the way it makes my balls tighten.

Her jaw loosens, her mouth hanging open an inch wider.

“I fucking hate you!” she screams. “I'm going to fucking kill you.”

I hate myself. I pray she does get the chance to fucking kill me, but neither her words nor her threats prevent her pussy from clamping, rippling along my cock as she comes.

Her roar is more of a scream than marked with pleasure, and it's tinted with hatred for her inability to control her body.

I fuck her through it, the clench of my jaw a real threat to cracking my back molars, but I can't grunt my own pleasure. It would be taking things a step too far if that's even fucking possible.

She looks more broken than I thought she could when she comes down from her release.

“You're the dirtiest fucking whore I've ever seen,” the voice says, and I pray since he hasn't mentioned it that he didn't notice her orgasm. He doesn't need that shit feeding his fucking perverse fantasies.

My nuts seize, and I know I'm going to come. I hate myself for it, but I can't stop it any more than she could. Instead of staying inside of her, I pull free, sitting back on my calves.

I came in her last time, but I'd never do something like that while I'm in control.

I know what the client wanted, but he can put a fucking bullet in my head for the change in plans.

His groan of pleasure echoing around the room just as the first rope of cum splashes across her body impedes my

own orgasm. It's akin to pouring a bucket of cold water over my head. I consider it a blessing because I was already hating myself for being able to get that far in the first place.

My chin quivers, the threat of vomiting making my eyes sting as the audio in the room explodes with the sounds of money rolling in. The client fucking enjoyed it and is paying extra for the experience. My skin crawls at the look of betrayal in her eyes, and I don't know if that energy is pointed in my direction or if she's internalizing what just happened. Maybe it's a little of both.

I swallow twice more as I look into her red-rimmed eyes, seeing pity more than anything there.

"I'm Nash," I whisper. "I'm so fucking sorry."

I barely shift to the left before puking.

Chapter 13

Ayla

Despite the hot shower, I'm still shaking an hour later. I knew there was a chance I'd have nothing more to do after the scene. Raul is an astute businessman. He normally doesn't schedule paid video scenes on nights that it may take away from in-person clients. Why pick when he can get paid for both?

I don't know why I think back to the time I was mugged outside of a movie theater when I was sixteen. Getting a knife pointed at me until I handed over the change from my movie ticket is nothing even close to the things I've experienced since.

I didn't want to be seen as a victim. I wanted to be strong, commended for not crying until my dad picked me up. I was strong then, calling the cops right after the robber took off into the darkness. I gave them my statement, providing as many details as I could without so much as a quiver in my chin.

I wasn't a victim. I told myself over and over, even as I cried into my pillow, unable to fall asleep. Even though it happened miles from my house, I no longer felt safe in my own home. I was certain the guy stood in the shadows and watched as I spoke with the cops, vowing to get back at me. No one ever climbed through my window to hurt me for speaking out, but they also never caught him either.

I don't know when my mentality shifted. I don't know when I started seeing myself as a victim. I think it happened right around the time Raul showed me a picture of my sister walking into her first class of the year. It didn't take them long to figure out who I was and what connections I had to the outside world. They took my car from the dorm parking lot. They couldn't draw any more suspicion if they wanted my lies to ring true to Alani. It wouldn't exactly work if they found an abandoned vehicle a hundred yards from the building.

I know now that I'm a victim, just as much as I know the man that made me one today was also one. I sympathize with him, but at the same time, I can't help but despise him too. Doing what he did to save his own hide is understandable. I've done it countless times in the last couple of months. I shouldn't hold him to a higher standard than I have myself, but I can't help it.

Pointing the finger and issuing blame are the only things that calm my nerves.

Actually considering and accepting that tonight felt different with him can't be allowed to seep inside of me. It wasn't different. He isn't different. He hurt me, threatened me, wrapped his hand around my throat without being prompted. He is just as much a monster as every man that came before him.

I stare at a spot on the wall, wishing I could just close off my mind. It would be much easier to deal with than the realization that I'm losing my fucking mind.

I've never been the type to enjoy violence or aggressive sex, and I know that not liking it now doesn't negate the fact that he made me orgasm. I know he knows he did. I'm not here living out some deep, dark fucking fantasies. I know I've had no choice, and that orgasm was forced from me just like everything else has been. I couldn't have stopped it any more than I can walk out the front door of this house and make it back to Texas safely.

Alani keeps me here. My little sister and the threat of harm heading in her direction keeps me here. I can't even formulate a lie about having any sort of power because the last of it was ripped from my body tonight.

I twist my fingers together, trying to stop the trembling in them, but it doesn't help. I ache from head to toe from the tremors I've had since I was untied from the bed and ordered back to my room.

I left before the man did, and I have no clue what happened to him after. It's very possible that he's already dead, but I can't bring myself to stand at the window, in fear of

watching one of Raul's men kick his lifeless body into a shallow grave. I don't want to know. I just pray I never see him again. He confuses my body and fucks with my head too much.

I climb off my bed, knowing I'm taking a real risk as I cross the room and stick my head out of the open doorway. The hallway is empty, but that doesn't mean the coast is clear. The men who work here keep regular patrols, and someone is always awake making sure we aren't getting any wild ideas about trying to escape.

I've already had my shower but I don't feel clean. The stain of shame is a constant on my skin, but tonight it's ten times worse for some reason.

I tiptoe across the hall, staring at the curtainless shower and communal bar of soap sitting on the edge. I'd eat the entire fucking bar if I thought it would make me feel clean from the inside out, but I know it won't. I'll live with the disgrace until Raul decides I'm no longer worth keeping alive. I swallow as I step into the tub, praying he makes that decision soon.

The water is cold, racing down my back toward the drain, but I relish the bite of pain it brings, refusing to take a step back until it warms some. I deserve the bites on my skin.

I don't know if it's a lack of stimulation. There's no television here, no books to read, no electronic devices to mindlessly shuffle through to fill the time. But I can't stop thinking about what happened. My first month here, I hyper focused on everything, reliving it over and over until it made me so sick I couldn't even eat the paltry excuse for food they sent up each day. I learned over time that I wasn't punishing anyone but myself and dying wasn't an option. I'd already been threatened with what that would mean for Alani.

I became a pro at experiencing shit and then promptly shoving it down so deep the memories seemed more like something I'd previously seen on television rather than something I experienced myself.

I can already tell that this last event will be impossible to shove down. I don't know if it's because of him or if that dark place I keep all these traumas is finally full and overflowing.

I scratch at my skin, making sure to rub the scabs threatening to form at my wrists. I want the pain because remembering the pleasure he forced me to feel will only make me sick.

His apology echoes, unwanted in my head, over and over, but even clamping my palms over my ears doesn't stanch the words.

He seemed genuine, but it doesn't matter.

He can't matter to me. Feeling sorry for anyone else will only breed trouble for me. I can't allow anyone else's pain and experience to alter my own path. I can't compromise my sister.

I turn the handle, stopping the flow of water before stepping out of the shower, nearly gagging as I touch the damp towel hanging off to the side. I don't know if they make us all use the same things as a way to assert power or if they're just thoughtless in how they treat us, but I can't imagine much worse than using a damp towel after getting clean.

I swipe at my skin, my nose pointed to the ceiling with disgust, before hanging it back up and walking back across the hall to my room. My bed isn't as welcoming as I've felt about it times before, but I climb under the threadbare sheet anyway.

Sleep never comes. I spend the early morning hours staring across the room, reliving my entire life. I try to stick to my earliest memories, of the day my parents smiled at me when I walked into the hospital room to see my sister for the first time. I think of holding her in my arms, my mother's soft warning about being careful with her head. I remember my vow to love and protect her, to be the best big sister in the world. I attempt to lock on to that promise, but the unspeakable things that have happened to me start to take over. I see the grinning faces of deviants, hear the maniacal laughter of criminals as they get pleasure from hurting me. I feel Pirro's

hot, sticky breath on my skin, the memories so real it makes me sit up in bed.

That's how the girl finds me when she carries a plate of food in my direction.

I've never seen her before, but it isn't the terrified look in her eyes that makes me gasp for air. She's wearing a ripped and stained Lindell Lemur shirt.

I try to meet her eyes, but she refuses to look in my direction.

I know to take the sight of the shirt as the threat it's intended to be. It's one more reminder about how easy it is to snatch someone right out from others' noses. It tells me just how likely it is that Alani could be next.

I can't ask how she is or what happened to her. We'd both get punished if either of us spoke. She pulls away when I try to squeeze her hand. She is no more interested in a reassurance than I am. We both know it's a promise neither of us have the capacity to keep.

I can tell by looking at her, in the briefest second that we lock eyes, that she isn't new to this experience. She doesn't beg for help as she places the plate on the bed in front of me. She looks as hopeless as I feel and that comes with time in this world.

All the people here serve some kind of purpose. The house operates with mostly prisoner labor, with the exception of the men tasked with keeping us in line. Why pay someone to prepare meals when you can just snatch someone off the streets and have them do it for free, and in exchange, they get to live?

The roles are rotated. Last week, this girl could've easily been earning her keep, so to speak, on her back just like I've been forced to. Next week, she could be working the laundry service before returning to a spot in front of the camera.

I pray every time I see Raul that I'm going to be getting a new assignment. I relished the days that I worked in the

kitchen, but the nights were worse. The servants who aren't earning money are kept in tight quarters, practically living on top of each other. How fucked up is it that I've come to value the limited semi-private space I'm allowed for being one of the ones who gets assaulted on a regular basis?

I watch her back as she leaves the room, the four eighty-seven on the back of her neck a clue as to how long they've had her.

The man I've interacted with recently was tattooed as five hundred twelve, so she's been here longer than him, but possibly not by much. There were six other women who I traveled with after getting abducted. I don't know how often they make the rounds snatching people up, but I've heard from whispers that this is the only house they're operating in Mexico. They could easily take turns dropping people off across several locations.

Just as she turns down the hall, Pirro replaces her in the doorway.

I can't help the way I swallow in fear. Of all the people here, he's the most violent, the one most prone to hurting people just for the hell of it. His behavior is so erratic he could be calm and collected one minute and the next, he's shoving a knife through someone's heart, his pulse never changing as he does it.

He smiles when he notices my reaction. He wants people to be afraid of him. It's what he lives for.

"Raul left on another business trip."

His words are more than just informative. He's issuing a warning. He's at his worst when Raul is gone. The boss is the only one capable of keeping him in check, and I think, deep down, he hates the man for it.

"There's already been another request for you. The man who paid for you to fuck that guy wants more."

I hate the way he licks his lips as his eyes skate down my body.

"He liked the power you pretended to have."

So he isn't talking about the guy from tonight, because it was very fucking clear I have no power in that situation.

“You have another scene tomorrow, which is a fucking shame. I want nothing more than to mark up your fucking skin today.”

He doesn't look at all disappointed, despite his words.

He inches forward until his thighs are bumping the edge of the bed. My pulse races, my heart threatening to pound right out of my chest as he bends closer.

“It just means I have to wait to make you bleed until after the scene is over and paid for.”

I swallow against the threat of vomit as he dips his face, his hot, scratchy tongue licking up the side of my face.

He turns around, leaving the room with only his threat and the wetness on my cheek behind.

It's a testament of how terrifying it is to be here that all I can feel is grateful that I didn't get in trouble for taking a second shower.

Chapter 14

Nash

“Wash,” the guy snaps as his hand shoves at my back.

My first instinct is to spin on him and punch him in the throat for having the fucking gall to disrespect me, but I know better. Arguing with the man instead of stepping into the shower basin would be incredibly ignorant when I need a fucking shower more than I need my next meal, which is saying a lot because these people are slowly fucking starving me to death.

I don't complain about the lack of soap. Being able to run my own hands over my skin is much better than the alternative of them turning that fucking water hose on me again. The water never really gets as hot as I'd like, but it warms enough to take the chill right out of the center of me.

I realized yesterday that the injections they've been giving me are antibiotics, and it pissed me off more than being saved should. It only prolongs the abuse and torture I have to suffer. I'm to the point of wanting to die, especially after what was asked of me yesterday.

I look over at the guard standing in the doorway. I heard Pirro refer to him as Rune. The man was never a part of the poker games so I can't be sure if that's his name or not. He looks bored, like he's got better things to do. He's never been outwardly mean, but he's no less a piece of shit for it either.

After swiping at my skin and trying to get as clean as one can with only water, I start to catalog my injuries, not planning to get out until I'm told to do so. The cut on my ribs doesn't seem as infected as it was a couple of days ago, and the way it's starting to heal around the edges pisses me off.

Pirro knows better. He called my bluff. I don't know how he knew I was willing to die, but he didn't even blink when shifting gears to threaten *her*.

I haven't been able to keep the woman out of my head. When I passed out from exhaustion, she still managed to

infiltrate my dreams.

My nightmares were worse than the reality we faced together. She begged me to hurt her, to cut her, to bruise her and leave scars behind. I complied, my hand shaking as I swiped the blade across her skin. It was the evil laugh that bubbled from my throat that finally had the power to wake me up.

I cut my eyes to Rune once again before checking the gash I can feel pulling against the stitches with every step I take. The threads she wove through my skin seem to be holding. I wonder if he faces his daily tasks with the same level of indifference when he's having to supervise the women when they shower?

Somehow, I doubt it.

I picture pulling the shower head from the wall and beating him to a bloody mess with it, but I know I can't. They would for sure kill me then, and that would mean never being able to lay eyes on her again.

Rune looks down at his watch before lifting his eyes to me.

"Only got a minute left, my man."

My man.

I could slit his throat and piss down his neck with that "my man" bullshit.

I turn off the water, reaching for the thin fabric meant to be a bath towel. He doesn't watch me, and I see the control in it, the way he isn't worried about me at all. He's not afraid of me, or maybe he's just itching for his own death. Is he someone trapped here like the rest of us? What could someone possibly say or threaten to make a person act the exact way they're expected even when it goes against everything they believe. Before yesterday, I would've argued that there was nothing, but Pirro picked at the scab quite effectively, didn't he?

I try to block out the grunts and sounds of people fucking. I try to ignore the pleas for help, knowing what it

means for the women in the other rooms. This entire operation is just one sick fucking perversion after another, and the sincerely fucked-up part of it is that people are paying to participate. I know from experience that where there's a demand for something, there are always those that will provide it, no matter the level of depravity. It's why I didn't doubt Pirro yesterday when he threatened to turn the video into a snuff film. I can only imagine the money something like that would draw.

I hate Angel for sending me here. I hate that he didn't force me to listen when he was lining out the job. I hate myself even more for letting my success rate on missions cloud my ability to take him seriously when he tried.

If I had a glance into my future, even a second of time to know this is where I'd end up, I would have forced myself to take a much different trajectory in life. I would've shoved down those feelings of anger I got every time someone tried to tell me what to do. I would've somehow accepted that I'd have a boss whose job it was to give me direction, or I would have chosen a field that put me in the position of being high man on the ladder.

I might have tried my hand at being a cop rather than being a vigilante. I would've attempted to obey the laws rather than thumbing my nose at them.

There's no way to change it now, so there's no point in wasting time on it.

Rune pushes away from the wall as I step closer, walking in front of me, leading the way rather than at my back. It lessens my chance of getting the jump on him.

I freeze in my tracks when he opens the door to the left rather than the one to the right that leads to the cell they've been holding me in.

Despite his uncanny ability to look bored, he doesn't hesitate to pull his gun out and point it at my head when I don't enter the room.

I've suffered so fucking much in there, that death is a better choice.

"He'll kill her, too," he mutters, the threat flat but somehow ringing true at the same time.

My feet move without taking an order from my brain, and I hate every single one of them for having something to force me into action with.

There's a man in the room I've never seen before, but he has a stethoscope around his neck rather than a knife or some other weapon in his hand.

"He's going to check your wounds," Rune says. I know it's sort of a peace offering because the man doesn't have to explain shit to me and we both know it.

The doctor walks around me, his head shaking as his eyes skate over my injuries.

"I'll give it to him, he really knows where to cut to cause the most pain."

The "he" he's referring to has to be Pirro.

Rune doesn't acknowledge the doctor's words.

"The antibiotics seem to be working. We'll keep him on the same regimen for the next couple of days."

I grind my teeth together as he walks to a black bag on the table against the far wall. The man prepares two needles instead of one.

"What's the other one?" I growl when he turns back around with one in each hand.

I step forward, evaluating if I'll be able to snap his neck before Rune can put a bullet in me, but the sound of him pulling the hammer back makes me freeze.

The threat to her is real, and the thought of having to witness her death over and over in my own purgatory is the only thing that makes me stand there as the doctor steps up, jabbing each of my fucking arms with the needles simultaneously.

I hiss, the fucking audacity of this man irritating me more than the fucking prick of the needles.

“What was the second one for?” I ask again when he takes a step back.

He holds up one needle, looking at the tip of it. “This was your antibiotics.”

I narrow my eyes at him, wondering if he’s offering his medical services for free in exchange for what this place has to offer him in terms of fulfilling his fucking perverted fantasies.

“This one?” I can’t help but attempt to focus on the tip of it. “This is the one that’s going to knock you on your ass.”

It’s as if his words have the power to activate the shit he just pumped into my body. My legs weaken, but there’s nothing I can do to stop the forward momentum of my body. I watch, wondering how much it’s going to hurt as the man steps to the side and just watches as I crumple to the floor.

Chapter 15

Ayla

Pirro's presence in the room is expected. I think he serves as a supervisor of sorts, the middleman between Raul and the customers. I have no doubt the man would want to watch even if he didn't have an official role. He's sick and fucking twisted that way.

I hate the wash of relief I feel when I notice that it's the same man as before on the bed across the room. What we're being forced to do to each other is fucking horrific, but I'd rather not have to victimize a new person.

I can feel Pirro's eyes on me, knowing he's attempting to read my thoughts as I watch the man. He's masked like usual, but there's no movement in his body other than the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathes.

I turn my head, looking toward Pirro.

"The request is for you to fuck a sleeping man." He looks in the guy's direction. "I doubt that man would be able to keep from gripping your ass while you rode him, so we drugged him."

I dart my eyes back in Nash's direction, wondering if I'm being set up to fail because—

"We gave him a little something for that, too," Pirro says with a sinister chuckle.

My eyes land on his cock, that part of him not exactly fully erect, but it's obvious with a little stimulation, even while he's drugged unconscious, it's going to work for what Pirro needs it to.

Begging at this point would be futile but I feel the words threatening to come out.

I feel the warmth of him half a second before I smell the stench of his breath as he inches closer. "Took a fucking horse tranquilizer to knock his ass out."

I squeeze my eyes closed when he traces the tip of my nipple with one finger. Pulling away from him would activate that demon inside that he seems in control of right now.

“The guy is too fucking cheap to pay for issuing verbal commands, so make sure to pay attention to the teleprompter.”

I nod my agreement, waiting for the command to get to work.

When Pirro shoves at my back a couple minutes later, it nearly knocks me off my feet.

I walk slowly, knowing when to turn on the look the client is paying for, because I've filmed so many things in the room before.

My face aches as I attempt to look evil and powerful, turned on by the sight of Nash just lying there, unable to do anything about what's about to happen to him. His arms aren't even tied down.

I coo shit about him being helpless and how I'm going to do all these things to his body as I climb on the bed, hating that fucking echoing sound of already getting tipped.

I slide my hands up his calves, disgusted with myself that I don't exactly hate the brush of his leg hair on the tips of my fingers.

My hands are trembling, and somehow this is worse than it would be if he were strapped to the bed and watching me as I touch him.

His cock doesn't jerk because his drugged body isn't reading my touch as sexual the way it's meant for the client. It isn't until I brush his inner thigh that it has more life in it.

Trained like the fucking sex slave that I am, I glance up at the teleprompter before actually touching him.

The client is eager to get to the show.

SUCK IT.

I swallow as I dip toward his groin, mouthing the very tip of him. The man begins to swell in my mouth, and

honestly, I wish it would take a little more fucking effort. I haven't forgotten what Pirro promised was going to happen after this scene was complete.

I normally don't have over twelve hours to think about being hurt, but I know he made the threat yesterday because he knew it would stay in my head all day.

I look up once again as I try and take him as far to the back of my throat as I can. The screen demands that I straddle him and tease my clit with his cockhead. Any other time, I'd be grateful for the speed at which this is moving.

Despite being fully erect now, he doesn't so much as twitch when I accidentally trap two of his fingers under my knee while trying to reposition myself. If the client wants this to be like the other sleeping scenes I've done, he's going to be extremely disappointed.

I've never had to be the instigator in one of those scenes. The others I've done had me waking up so horny and needy that I practically attacked the man who woke me up through molestation, just too horny to control myself.

Ask nearly any fucking woman, getting woken up because you're being fondled while you're fucking sleeping isn't a fucking turn on. I'd punch a guy in the eye if it ever happened to me before I was forced to act out the scene here.

I want to cry at the precum on the tip of his cock when I lift it to my body as I straddle him. The arousal isn't an indication of his consent, something I know the man wouldn't give if he were awake.

I moan with the first brush, hating that part of it is for show for the client and some because it feels good.

The teleprompter urges me to slide down his cock, specifically moaning like a whore when I do.

I obey, lifting his cock and lining it up at my entrance, wondering about my own depravity when I know I probably didn't need the lube I slickened myself with.

My mouth opens, no sound coming out as I slide down, the stretch he causes inside of me leaving me breathless.

I realize the mistake too late, but the *cha-ching* that fills the room when I do belt out a fake moan says the idiot on the other end of the transaction is none the wiser.

LIFT HIS HAND AND HOLD IT TO YOUR TIT

I'm still on him, fully impaled by his cock as I reach for one of his hands. My legs tremble, the threat of tears burning the backs of my eyes as I reach for his hand. The bend of my body has him pressing against that part inside of me I was hoping to avoid. His hand is colder than it should be, making the nurse in me wonder about the conditions they've been keeping him in and running through a list of things that could cause low circulation.

I lift his fingers to my mouth, taking in the redness on the tips before sucking on one. It was the only way I could get a better look without raising suspicions.

Pulling back his fingers when they threaten to curl, I situate his palm under my breast, hating the way my nipple tightens with his forced touch.

This is worse than yesterday, ten times more deviant. I wasn't in control of what he did yesterday, no more than I was in control of how I reacted to it. I didn't want to come. He made me. The tables are fully turned now.

I shift my weight, gearing up to rise, letting his cock pull free from my body to the tip, when the doors burst open.

Gunfire, something I don't hear very often even in a place like this, echoes around the room.

With a scream, I dive off the bed, praying the platform built around it is enough to stop a bullet, if any fly my way.

Begging for my life is on the tip of my tongue when my head is jerked back, my blond hair tangled in a man's fingers.

He looks utterly disgusted with the sight of me. I want to beg for my life. I want to tell him all the things I can do for him if only he lets me live. I've heard some of the men complaining that there are other groups that have been raiding places like this, killing the men, and taking over.

Pirro was always quick to shut them down, saying no one is fucking brave enough to go against Raul Cortez.

Tears are streaming down my face when the man lifts me to my knees. I see just how wrong Pirro was because he's lying on the floor with half his face missing.

The tremble starts right in the center of me until I'm shaking so hard I'm terrified this man is going to think I'm trying to escape.

"Pl-Please," I beg as he sneers down at me.

"You're as bad as the fucking men here," he growls, the light glinting off the barrel of his gun as he holds it to my head.

I can only nod, knowing he's right. I've been so willing to hurt others just to save myself and Alani. I'm a terrible person, even worse than many of the others. Because if I had to relive everything I've done, I wouldn't change a fucking thing.

"Will Alani be safe?" I ask, my words so weak, I'm not even sure he can understand them.

"Angel!" another man yells from the doorway.

My eyes snap in that direction as another group of men dressed as commandos enters the room.

"It'll be the last thing you do," the man warns, his rifle pointed at the man gripping the handful of my hair.

I feel no safer when he releases me because he doesn't change the direction he's pointing his gun as they inch closer to him.

"Fucking Cerberus," he mutters, the hand holding his gun dropping to his side.

He sneers in my direction one last time before holstering his weapon.

It seems like hours of me staring up at him until his form is replaced by the soft, wary, yet reassuring smile of a

woman. She doesn't tell me everything is going to be okay when she wraps a soft blanket around my naked body.

Nash is still laid out on the bed as she escorts me out of the room.

Chapter 16

Nash

Waking up has been the worst part of all of this.

When sleep comes, despite the wounds on my body, I've been able to take some solace in the fact that maybe when I close my eyes it will be the last time, maybe I won't wake to another day of abuse and torture.

I clench my fists, my pain not as bad as it has been but still enough to tell me I'm alive.

Something's different. The fabric at my back doesn't make sense. Pirro was never one to offer any sort of amenities.

I can recall the doctor and the shots, him telling me he drugged me. Everything after is a blank slate. I try to open my eyes, considering that I may have been sold. As much as I'd like to think it could mean I've ended up in a better place, I know better. Losing my usefulness is bad news.

I cough twice, trying to scratch the itch at the back of my throat, but nothing seems capable of reaching it.

“Water?”

I jerk my head to the side, pulling my face back in an effort to avoid danger.

“Angel?”

I blink rapidly, but the man doesn't disappear. It does help the room come into focus. I don't know how I should feel about the sterile place. It should come as a relief. I should cry tears of happiness that, by some miracle, I've been rescued from the clutches of Raul Cortez's men.

Angel lifts my hand, shoving a pink, plastic cup into it. The straw tries to dart away from my mouth, but rather than wasting time chasing it, I press my lips directly to the side of the cup and drain the entire thing.

“The doctor said you're dehydrated, but they got you hooked up to that shit.”

I follow the point of his finger to the IV bags hanging from the pole.

“They fucked you up pretty badly.”

I scoff, as if I wasn't aware of exactly what happened to me, but then I look down at my body, having no fucking clue what happened after I was drugged. I guess it's easily possible with a doctor there that they took some of my fucking organs.

“Why are you looking so swollen and irritated?” I ask because I may lose my shit if he's pissed that he's here.

I don't fucking need anyone to sit at the fucking bedside and make sure I'm okay.

“I'm not going to apologize if that's what you're after,” he says, his tone flat and unaffected, a complete contradiction to the look that was previously on his face.

“I don't need fucking apologies. Why are you even here?”

Angel tilts his head, and I stiffen at the sight of the two men standing across the room. So much for being a fucking expert, capable of assessing a situation. I didn't even notice the two goons.

The leather cuts are a little “look at me”, but to each their fucking own.

“Who the fuck are you?” I snap, my voice weaker than I'd like, considering these guys aren't exactly looking like friends.

The biggest tattooed motherfucker steps forward, his chest patch reading *PRESIDENT*, and *KINCAID* right under it.

“We're wondering the same about you,” he says, instead of answering my question.

“They're not so sure that you weren't part of Cortez's group,” Angel says, his tone dry as if he's had this conversation numerous times already.

“Have you seen what they did to me?” I snap, unwell to waste the energy jerking the covers back to reveal my wounds.

I have no intention of trying to test the limits of the pain meds I've been given, and I don't owe these motherfuckers anything. "I was their captive, not one of them."

I know that I'm here because the men who had me are dead. From what I can gather, these men, along with Angel, came into the compound where I was being held and managed to get me out. That means people are dead. Men like Pirro and Cortez don't just hold their hands up and allow their possessions to be taken. I wonder what things would look like for me if Pirro had opted to give me a job after that last poker game rather than imprisoning me.

"That tattoo on the back of your neck is the only thing keeping you alive," the tattooed president spits. "If we get word you were a part of what was going down—"

"You'll what?" I challenge, trying not to wince as I attempt to sit up straighter in the bed.

The man shakes his head as he looks at me. "Fucking mercenaries."

He leaves the room, the other guy on his team following him out.

A massive three-headed dog covers the leather on both of their backs, the bottom rocker reading *Farmington, New Mexico*, the top one declaring them the *Cerberus MC*.

"They're a long way from home," I mutter when the door finally closes.

"You don't want to be on those fuckers' radars," Angel says, his body relaxing a little as he slouches in his chair.

I didn't even notice the tension in his spine until he released it.

"They're the fucking good guys. The mostly by the book guys. They're allowed to break the rules on occasion but thumb their fucking noses at those doing good if they're only doing it for a paycheck."

I look around the bed for one of those buttons that can be pushed to administer pain meds, but come up empty.

“Where the fuck are we?”

“Monterrey,” he answered. “Tell me what happened.”

My eyes squeeze shut. Just the thought of talking about any of it makes my skin crawl.

“They drugged me. Did they take my organs?”

Silence fills the room, a wave of dread filling me as I roll my head on the pillow and look at him.

“How bad is it?”

I’m not connected to any machines other than the IV, but I’m not exactly a fucking medical professional. I don’t know what I can live without.

“The doctor didn’t mention any missing organs, just a bunch of fucking cuts and shit.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, trying to convince my hands to stop trembling, but I’m a failure at that too.

“What happened?”

I hate that the man has the fucking gall to repeat his question.

“You were their captive once. You should know what happened.”

I can’t even look him in the eyes, shame for what I did feeling like a wet blanket over my face. It’s smothering and mentally torturing. I’d take a hundred more slashes to my skin if it meant not having to do what I did.

“What happened to me, and what I walked in on with the other guys, didn’t look like what I experienced several years ago,” Angel says. “I was tortured, cut up, tattooed just like you but—” He snaps his jaw closed.

“What did you walk in on?” I ask, not exactly sure I really want to know.

“They were making a fucking movie. You were laid out on the bed, and the woman—” He swallows, his eyes darting

across the room. “The doctor said you were pumped full of horse tranquilizers and Viagra.”

“Is she okay?”

He tilts his head. “What?”

“Was she blond? Blue eyes?” I lift my hand and point to the left side of my chest. “A scar right here on her breast?”

“She was riding your cock while you were unconscious when we came into the room.”

“Is she safe?” I growl.

“I killed everyone in that room.”

All the air inside of me leaves my lungs, an emotion I’m not at all familiar with making my skin grow cold.

“I would’ve fucking killed her too if those goddamned Cerberus fuckers hadn’t shown up.”

I snap my gaze back in his direction. “She’s alive?”

He clenches his jaw. “She was fucking raping you.”

“They made both of us do some seriously fucked-up things.”

“They made you—”

“You’re not a fucking therapist,” I growl. “I’m not talking about this shit with you.”

“I’m just—”

“Why don’t you go first then, motherfucker. Tell me what it was like for you.”

His cheeks swell when he grinds his teeth together, his lips firmly closed. We stare at each other for a long moment before he settles the challenge with a single nod of his head.

“Cortez wasn’t there,” he says after a long moment. “We took out a lot of his men, but he’s got fucking houses like that all over Mexico and South America. Until he’s dead...” He shakes his head, but I know it’s not disappointment in me.

The man was hopeful he was finally going to be able to kill the monster of his own nightmares. Coming up short can't be a very good feeling.

"They're making videos, doing live feeds with sick fucks paying to witness it, control the narrative, that kind of shit," I tell him.

"There's a lot of money in shit like that," he agrees.

I'm thankful he's not looking at me. Being analyzed right now is the very last thing I need.

"You said you killed everyone in that room. Does that include Pirro?"

Angel shrugs. "It's not like they had fucking IDs in their pockets."

Angel is seeking Cortez, but Pirro is the fucking monster in my story.

"Big fucker," I say, pointing to the right side of my face. "Scar going from here to here?"

A slow smile tugs up the corners of his mouth. "I blew that scar right off his fucking face."

I nod, a thank you of sorts, still regretting I wasn't the one who got to kill him like I'd vowed so many times.

"And the woman?"

"You say she was forced, but it didn't look forced. Say the word and I've still got one in the chamber for her ass."

"Angel."

He holds his hands up. "If you change your mind, I'd prefer you change it quickly. Cerberus is hard to hit on their own turf. Their fucking clubhouse is like a goddamned fortress. I bet Kincaid has over two dozen members by now. Don't let the fact that he's old as hell fool you. He's as much a badass now as I imagine he was in his prime."

I shake my head. "Not going to change my mind. She did nothing wrong."

“She was riding your cock while you were unconscious, moaning like a fucking whore.”

Heat rushes through my body at the suggestion that she felt some level of pleasure while they were forcing her to do what she was doing.

“Drop it,” I mutter as I close my eyes. I don’t need this man stepping up to seek any kind of vengeance for me, especially not against her. “Let me get some fucking sleep.”

He doesn’t say a word as he stands, closing the door softly behind him.

Chapter 17

Ayla

I inch my face just a little closer, but it doesn't make what he's telling me any more comprehensible.

"There's protocol," he says, his position firm despite the sympathy I see in his fucking eyes.

"Protocol? You have protocols about keeping me hostage?"

His jaw flexes, and I watch as he masterfully lets the irritation drain away. It's like magic, seeing this burly fucking man calm himself with only two breaths, when the men I was with before would just stew in those emotions before taking it out on someone else.

"You're not a hostage."

"But I can't go home?"

"Not yet."

"I want to speak to your supervisor."

He slow blinks at me, and I can't help but wonder if I've made a mistake. With Pirro and the men who had me before, I knew I couldn't ask such things of them. I could be wrong in wagering that I can with him.

"I'm the president."

"I've been gone for a couple fucking months, not years. I'm not crazy, and you're not the fucking president. I know America is trying to be all progressive and shit, but they'd never elect a man covered in—"

"Club president," he interrupts.

"Well, I'm not a member of your fucking club, so your rules don't apply to me."

Someone on the other side of the hotel room attempts to cover a laugh with a cough. This president looks in his direction, but not in a way that makes me think the guy is

going to get his ass handed to him for it. Like it would've happened under Pirro's watch.

"We have to verify who you are," he says, his voice so calm it's irritating.

He's making me feel like the crazy one, not the other way around.

"What we saw... this is a new situation for us. There's protocol."

He sounds like a broken record player, but that's not the part I home in on. "What you saw?"

I swallow at realizing what he's concerned about.

"You were the aggressor," he explains, taking a step forward. "We have to make sure that—"

I shrink away from him, my bravery only going so far. Apparently, I've found the end of it with him.

"We've been able to trace some of your steps."

I turn to face the woman who's speaking, almost certain that she's the one who wrapped the blanket around me. So much of it was a blur that I can't be a hundred percent sure. "You've religiously called your sister, same time, same day of the week for months."

Tears burn my eyes, and just like before, I do my best not to let them fall. I haven't been around this group enough to know if I'll be punished for crying, but I can't help but hear the warning in her voice. It rips me apart from the inside that I may have just traded one set of captors for another.

"We've never seen a situation where captives have been able to call home. Most vanish without a trace. Sometimes we're able to locate them and get them home."

"I was being held captive by them," I assure her. "They let me—"

"We found a copy of your resignation letter on file at the hospital you worked for," the club president says.

“Your checking account has had bi-monthly deposits from the same organization that you’ve told everyone in Texas you were going to work for. We know that is a shell company for Raul Cortez’s cartel.”

I shake my head. “What?”

“You can understand now why we can’t just let you go,” the woman says, her voice calming in a way that I hate.

I don’t want to be calm. I want to rage against every single one of them for even hinting that they think I was a willing participant in what has happened to me over the last couple of months.

“From how things look right now, you were a paid employee, not a hostage.”

The tears choose now to fall, but they have no more effect on any of them than I imagine keeping them dry would’ve.

“They were going to hurt Alani,” I whisper.

“Your sister who just finished her first semester at Lindell University,” the tattooed man says.

I nod. “They took me from the parking lot at her dorm, the day before classes started. I... our parents...” My chin quivers. “I’m all she has. Sh-she’s all I have.”

“Like I said, we’re working through confirming your reason for being at that compound,” the man says.

“Reason? You make it sound like I had a choice. Have you seen my body? I’m covered in fucking scars. They—”

He holds his hand up. As quick as I was to tell him he didn’t have control over me despite claiming the highest position in this club he has, I snap my mouth closed.

“We’re not saying you’re a liar. I’m telling you we have to confirm who you are.”

“For argument’s sake, say you find out I’m part of Raul’s fucking team, that I take pleasure in the things I was forced to do. What happens to me then?”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” he says, his refusal to explain more ominous than knowing exactly what he’s capable of.

“I want to speak to Alani!” I demand. “Cortez wasn’t there, and that means she may not be fucking safe. I want to speak with my sister!”

He takes a step back as warm hands clasp my shoulders. “Let’s go back into the room.”

I don’t know why I let her guide me out of the living room area of the suite. I consider that maybe she has a phone, and as a woman, she’ll be a little easier to sway.

“I want to leave,” I tell her once we’re alone in the bedroom. “If none of you will let me call her, then I’ll find someone who will. Cortez was using her to keep me compliant.”

She watches me, that same sympathetic look in her eyes she’s had since I first laid eyes on her back at the compound.

“Would you stop fucking looking at me like you can’t decide if I’m a lying psychopath or the saddest victim you’ve ever met?”

“The saddest victims I’ve ever seen have always been dead.”

“So then you think I liked doing what I did? That I made all those videos of my own free will? They threatened to send them to her and the police. When I told them no one would ever believe them, they said they’d take her and turn her into their most profitable whore. Have you ever loved someone so much you’d do anything to protect them?”

She doesn’t verbally respond, and I have my answer. It’s not that what I did is so incredibly reprehensible. She’s never had someone in her life that she’d burn the world down for. I think I’ve proven that I’d do anything imaginable to protect my sister, and I sure as fuck won’t apologize for it.

My chin trembles as I switch tactics. “Did you see these?”

Her eyes dart away when I open my robe to reveal my scarred flesh.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Do you think I liked it when they cut into me? That I like being hurt this way? Have you spoken with Nash? Ask him about what happened at that compound.”

“I’ll let you know what we find out,” she says, before turning around and leaving the room.

The door locks from the inside, but I feel no less like a prisoner than I did without the door at the compound.

I press my ear to the door, certain when they call the woman “Slick” that it’s a sexual term. It makes me second-guess my safety. They may be preventing me from leaving, but they haven’t made any overtures or looked at me the way Pirro and his men did.

Their voices grow too low and mumbled for me to understand anything else, but I don’t pull open the door. We’re several stories up in this suite of rooms, so it’s not like I can climb out of the window.

Knowing Cortez wasn’t part of the body count in that house makes my skin crawl. Pirro and every other man in that house were killed. I do feel a high level of gratitude for that, but I also can’t stop thinking about the other houses Cortez has just like the one I left. Taking down one team of men and shuttering the doors on one house of depravity doesn’t ruin his business. If anything, it’s a minor hiccup, and one he can easily resolve, considering all it would take is another trip to a college town to get more victims.

Chapter 18

Nash

“Then give me a fucking prescription for antibiotics,” I growl, uncaring that the doctor is looking at me like I’m a piece of shit.

“Mr.—” He looks down at the binder in his hands. “Cutler, I advise against leaving without medical consent.”

I inch forward, the way he shrivels a little making me feel somewhat better about my recent incapacitation. At least I still have some intimidation factor left. “You don’t even know my name. Why should I fucking listen to you?”

“If you leave, we aren’t liable for—”

“Get me the fucking prescription. Do I look like a man who’s willing to sue someone? I have other ways of righting the wrongs done to me.”

I swear I’d hear him swallow a gulp of air if the nurse standing five feet away didn’t gasp at my threat.

He nods quickly, taking several steps to the side to avoid having to walk within arm’s reach of me.

The doctor stops right in the doorway, looking a little green. “Mr. Cutler, there’s also the matter of your insurance. I —”

He freezes when I narrow my eyes at him.

“I’ll let the business office know you’ll send us the information as soon as you can.”

“You do that,” I mutter, wanting to laugh as he scurries away.

Quickly deciding I don’t even need the fucking antibiotics he claimed I did, since they’ve been pumping me full of them for two days, I head out of the room. I imagine the doctor’s more likely to call security than head to the pharmacy.

“Why is everyone leaving your room, looking like you just threatened their entire families?” Angel asks from his propped position on the wall.

“Bunch of pussies.”

He nods, understanding completely. We aren't exactly the most approachable men. You can't do the jobs we do and stay nice and pleasant.

“Here,” he says, just before tossing a stack of clothes at my chest. “Figured you wouldn't want to walk out of here with your ass hanging out.”

Instead of going back into the room to change, I head toward the bathroom in the hall. Every step causes one or more of the wounds on my body to sting with pain. Several are bad enough to make me almost wince, but showing anyone that I'm hurting would be confessing to a weakness I can't reveal to anyone. Not even Angel, despite him being the closest thing to a friend I have, and that's not saying much because I don't know shit about him.

Needing to breathe fresh air for the first time in two weeks, I don't take long in the bathroom, refusing the entire time I'm in there to look in the mirror. I don't need a full body scan to know what was done to me. I feel the ache of it with every movement of my body.

“You have that fucking determined look in your eye,” Angel says as I walk past him after leaving the bathroom without a word. “You aren't exactly in fucking peak fighting form, Nash.”

He doesn't touch me or try to stop me as I walk past the front sliding doors of the hospital.

“Lauren is going to be pissed if you get me killed,” he mutters as he redirects us toward a truck in the parking lot.

“I'm not going to get you killed,” I tell him. I'm not fucking responsible for his ass. “Do you have any idea where they took her?”

Angel told me yesterday that the one I had so much interaction with was escorted away by that Cerberus group.

“She won’t come to any harm with Cerberus,” he says after we both settle inside of his truck. “She’s fine.”

“And I’ll verify that for myself,” I tell him, same as I did yesterday when we had this conversation. “Are you taking me to the bus station? Don’t exactly have my fucking passport.”

“I’m not taking you to the goddamned bus station,” he grumbles, clenching the steering wheel when some idiot pulls out right in front of him.

“What’s their address in New Mexico? I guess, just get me as close as you’re willing to take me.”

I’m not asking the man for shit, but I’m also not going to turn down the offer either. I’m in no fucking position to turn anything down right now.

“They haven’t left town yet,” he says.

“Why not?”

He turns his face in my direction “I don’t fucking know. I’m aware of the fucking club but I don’t subscribe to their fucking newsletter or anything.”

I huff a humorless laugh.

“They’re more likely to fucking have her prosecuted than killing her. They would’ve let me do that back at the compound if that’s what they were planning to do.”

I clench my hands on my thighs. He still hasn’t given up on the idea that she needs to die, despite what I’ve told him.

“But seriously, you should just walk away from all of it. Being on Cerberus’s radar is never a good thing.”

“I don’t give a shit about Cerberus,” I snap, reaching for the handle above my head when he slams on the brakes to avoid another fucking collision.

People in fucking Mexico sure as shit don’t know how to drive.

“I just need to know that she’s okay.” My words are expelled on a growl from the pain the quick movement caused

me.

Angel looks in my direction once more. “Maybe leaving the hospital early was a mistake.”

“Would you have stayed a second longer?”

He shakes his head. “I would’ve been gone the second I woke up. I was starting to think you were a pussy for staying.”

His grin tells me he’s mostly joking, but I don’t feel an ounce of fucking humor in anything right now.

“Do you have any idea what your plans are?”

“Past finding her? Not a fucking clue.”

“The other guys scattered to the fucking winds when Cerberus showed up right behind us at the compound, but I’m sure they’re still available for work if we need them.”

“Work?”

“I was hoping you had a bead on where fucking Cortez might have slithered off to.”

I shake my head. “They kept me in a cell except when they needed me for something. Other than people screaming and begging for help, I didn’t hear shit. I don’t even know if it was Cortez’s compound. The only hint that it might’ve been is Pirro. That scarred motherfucker used his name to garner respect at the fucking bar they took me from.”

His jaw clenches, his hatred for Cortez so thick and heavy that just hearing his name pisses him off.

“Why was that motorcycle club there in the first place?”

“Shadow, the VP, said they tracked a freshman girl there who was taken from Lindell University a couple of months ago.”

“They just go around looking for missing girls?”

“They take contracts. I think they use the money to aid in rescuing others. Their goal is to try and put an end to all of it,” Angel explains.

“A fucking futile task if there ever was one,” I mutter.

“Yep,” he agrees. “They think they’re better than us, despite the outcome being the same. They do it with a little more structure and that somehow makes them the fucking experts. Like we aren’t risking our lives for the same thing.”

I don’t argue with him but getting paid for what I do is secondary. I hate knowing people are suffering what I went through. I want to put an end to every man who has ever victimized someone the way I was forced to. I’d never abide by some code of ethics to do it, but I commend those Cerberus assholes for being capable of it.

“You think finding this girl will make what happened to you better, but I can tell you from experience, that it won’t.”

“I need to hear her story to determine what my next plan is.”

Silence fills the cab of the truck, Angel grunting on occasion when idiot after idiot races around him like he’s simply on the road to be in their way.

“She mentioned someone named Alani.”

“In what context?”

“Right before I was going to shoot her in the fucking head, she asked if it meant that Alani was going to be okay.”

I nod, fully understanding her position. I thought she was part of Pirro’s band of fucking perverted misfits too, but there was care in her touch when she treated my wounds. There was a softness in her reassurance without words that she wasn’t there to hurt me even though what she did caused pain and discomfort. She gave me looks, when it was my turn to hurt her, that she wasn’t going to hold it against me. She mentioned that they’d hurt us both if we didn’t comply. Pirro threatened her to control me. Why would he do that if she was a valued member of his team?

Alani, whoever she is, was her reason for doing all of it. They controlled her through that threat.

“Did Cerberus have a list of people they took from the compound? Was this Alani person one of them?”

Angel shrugs. "I got you out of there and that's it. The others who were there weren't my concern."

And that's the biggest difference between what we do and what Cerberus does. If they were there for one girl, but they stuck around to aid everyone else, then they are better men than us. Knowing that doesn't make me feel any different, however. Going through what I went through makes me want to tighten the reins in my life even more, not stick my neck out further for people I don't know. I accepted long ago that I wasn't a very good man. I don't have compassion or empathy for others. Some people are dealt a really shitty hand in life, but it's not my job to pull them out of it. After this latest experience, I'm even less willing to risk my own safety.

"That's all she said?"

"Didn't have much of a chance to say anything else before Cerberus showed up and took over the entire thing."

My skin crawls at the thought of them not showing up and Angel killing her. What would I have done if I'd woken up in the hospital to the news of him putting a bullet in her head? Would I be able to sit calmly and see things from his point of view? Would I have done the same if my job was to pull him out of that man-made hell?

Why does it even fucking matter?

I know the answer to that, despite not wanting it to be true.

That woman somehow got under my skin. As much as I'd like to say that I could never do the things she did to protect this Alani person, I know that's a lie.

I did those things to fucking protect her, didn't I?

Angel pulls up to the front door of one of the nicer hotels in Monterrey.

"How do you know they're here?" I ask, leaning forward so I can look up the side of the building as if by chance she may be standing in one of the windows for all the world to see.

“Fox told me.”

He'd mentioned some of the other guys being there for my rescue. I figured Fox would be the last one willing to tag along, considering the man's claim on always working alone.

“How the fuck do I find them in this massive hotel?”

“Follow the scent of fucking leather,” he says in a serious tone. “Let me know if that bitch isn't here, and I'll personally escort you to New Mexico.”

I look at him. The man is making it very clear that he's not her biggest fan, despite the explanations I've tried to provide.

“Here,” he says when I open the passenger side door.

I look from the wad of cash in his hand to his eyes. I don't fucking want it. It feels too much like a goddamned favor.

“I'll take it out of your next job.”

I scoop the money out of his hand, not telling him that I doubt I'll take another job he arranges.

Angel doesn't hesitate to drive off the second I close the truck door. I'm left standing on the curb outside of this swanky ass hotel, in borrowed clothes, covered in bruises and scars.

I don't acknowledge anyone as I walk inside, shoving the money in the front pocket of my jeans. I spot one of those leather-clad motherfuckers smiling and chatting with one of the front desk clerks, like he's lining up where he's going to stick his cock when her shift ends.

Without hesitation, I approach him.

“I want to see that woman,” I snap when he notices me, positioning his body between me and the woman behind the desk.

His fucking hero complex is coming off him in waves. The name tag identifying him as *UGLY* on his chest has to mean something else, because the man, on anyone's standards, isn't a bad-looking guy.

“No,” he says, his white teeth flashing when he sneers at me.

I might’ve been able to take this asshole to the ground if I were in fit form, but Angel was right. I’m nowhere near that right now.

“Then you’ll take me to see Kincaid,” I say, shifting gears, although I’m not certain it will keep him from knocking my lights out.

Chapter 19

Ayla

It's day two, and although the people who have identified themselves as the Cerberus motorcycle club have fed me and left me alone, I don't feel like any less of a captive than I felt yesterday.

I didn't sleep well, even having a door that locks between me and them. I didn't lock it out of fear of what trouble that may cause me. I don't know if I'll ever sleep well again. I got too accustomed to keeping such strange hours, I could feel the emptiness of the living room from inside this room in the early morning hours. When I did try to sleep, they were active, each noise they created making me jump because it's normal for people to be awake at fucking noon.

The high-end looking digital clock on the bedside table tells me it's midafternoon, but I'm still sitting on the bed, watching the door.

I'm a reasonable person. I know I can get up and look out the window. I know I can go take another shower in the ensuite bathroom if I want to. It hasn't helped me get out of the bed and do any of those things. I can't help but think they're just another group waiting for some fucking buyer to come pick me up, that they're waiting for funds to clear or something. They don't have to be hurtful individual monsters to sell me to the highest bidder. People can still lack morals and not be a rapist. They can still bear witness to atrocities and do nothing to stop them.

Just like it did whenever someone walked past my doorless room, my heart rate triples when someone knocks on the door. I regret immediately not locking it, no matter that they're knocking rather than just shoving it open.

"Y-yes?" I manage.

The woman everyone calls Slick steps into the room, leaving the door open at her back as if she thinks it will make me feel any less trapped.

“Why do they call you Slick?” I ask, desperate to know if it’s for the reason I pictured it was.

She’s pretty enough, and regardless of the wedding rings several of the men are wearing, I have no doubt she’s spreading her legs for each of them.

A soft smile spreads across her face, and once again, I hate the way it threatens that fight-or-flight voice inside of me with how sincere she makes it look.

“It’s a name I got stuck with in the Marine Corps.”

“Is it a sexual reference?” I ask. as if I’m irritated with her wasting my time, when, honestly, I have nothing but time to spare it seems.

She scoffs. “I’ve often wondered if that might’ve made things easier for me.”

Her smile slips away when she notices the look on my face.

Alani often told me I have the angriest resting bitch face, but it comes with the territory of being responsible for so much too soon in life.

“I’m a psychologist. The guys started calling me that because they felt like I was always in their heads, trying to be *slick* and get them to talk about their feelings. The nickname has followed me my entire career.”

“So, not because you’re fucking all the men out there?”

She doesn’t cringe away at my vulgarness.

“My man is back home, recovering from an injury. There aren’t very many single members in Cerberus.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” I ask, my suspicions growing and growing.

“I want you to feel safe.”

“Can’t exactly feel safe when I’m not allowed to leave, *Slick*.” I snap out her name like an insult.

“If it makes you feel more comfortable, you can call me Dr. Sullivan or even Brynn. That’s my first name.”

“Does this ‘make friends with them, give them a little information so they feel a bond,’ work on those Marines, Slick?”

She never falters, never clenches her jaw once in irritation.

“No one is going to hurt you here. You aren’t in any danger.”

“I was told the same thing before. I went days without anyone hurting me under Raul Cortez’s watch, but the pain always comes.”

She eyes the empty edge at the bottom of the bed as if she’s wanting me to offer it for her to sit down on, but we’re not fucking besties. I don’t want any one of them any closer to me than they have to be.

“It took us a while to get the video from Lindell because they cycle every ninety days. With the help of BBS, we were able to verify your story about being abducted.”

“I don’t know what a BBS is,” I mutter.

I refuse to get excited. She may have been able to verify my truth, but she hasn’t told me I’m free to go, even after accusing her and her team more than once since she walked in here of being my captors.

“BBS is Blackbridge Security. We have a really great IT specialist, but their guy, Wren, is the best in the business.”

She’s not lying about being a fucking psychologist. She’s like every other one I had the displeasure of meeting while working in the hospital. For people who say they’re there to listen, they sure do love the sound of their own fucking voices.

“Am I free to go?”

She gives me a soft smile.

“You’re free to go, but before you bolt out of here, I wanted to talk to you about some resources we have.”

“I don’t need your resources.”

“We have connections at the American Embassy. We can help you to have it fast tracked, but they won’t let us take you across the border without a copy of your passport.”

I could tell her that I don’t have a passport, that becoming a fucking parent to a teen girl at the age of twenty didn’t exactly leave much time for traveling the fucking globe.

“How long will that take?”

“A couple days.”

“And if I don’t have one?”

Her smile falters. “Longer.”

“You can’t get me across the same way I was brought here?”

The woman looks like I slapped her in the face.

I guess that’s a no then.

I push away the covers on the bed, feeling like I should apologize for having the shoes given to me on while I was in it. But I had no clue what I was going to be facing with these people.

“We can get you in touch with counseling services.”

I have no idea why her words piss me off as much as they do. I’ve said them too many times myself when people come into the emergency room having been victimized in one form or another

“I’m fine.”

She gives me another weak smile. If she’s been doing this for very long, then she knows I’m full of shit.

“Your apartment was cleaned out in Plano. It’s been rented to someone else. We can help you get back on your feet.”

“I need to see my sister,” I hiss. “She’s not safe.”

I don't know if either of us will ever be safe again. There's too much evil in the world, too many chances to get hurt, for me to ever stop looking over my shoulder now.

"What will you tell her?"

I freeze, turning my attention back to her.

"I'll tell her nothing. She doesn't need to know."

Slick doesn't look very impressed with my declaration, but it's not my job to make her feel better.

"She's going to have questions."

"I'll tell her I was able to make it back from Guam for Christmas," I insist.

"Christmas was yesterday."

My heart pounds in my chest. I might've known that had I felt safe using the remote on the bedside table and turning on the television.

"What will you tell her about the bruises?"

I press my fingers to the purple under my left eye. I didn't exactly have cosmetic concerns when I flew off the table as all those men came into the recording room in a hail of bullets. I don't know what I hit on the way down, but it left one hell of a black eye.

"You'll have to tell her eventually. We have people who can help you work through all of it and make sure you're in a better place to have that conversation."

"She. Isn't. Safe," I repeat slower, as if she's an idiot rather than a damned doctor because the woman isn't fucking listening.

"We have people in Lindell keeping an eye on her."

"That feels like a threat," I say, my eyes running the length of her in an effort to determine whether I can get the upper hand if I lunge.

"I assure you it isn't."

"They said—"

“You’ll let me fucking see her or you’ll have to fucking kill me!” a man roars from the other room.

I hate the way Slick holds her hand out as she reaches for a gun concealed under her clothing. It’s her way of telling me to stay back, that she’s willing to get hurt protecting me, and I don’t fucking like it. It calls into memory too many things I ignored while under Pirro’s entrapment in an effort to keep my sister safe. This woman saying she has a man back home to get back to, yet she’s willing to get hurt before that happens to protect a stranger, is fucking foreign to me.

Even fully dressed, clothes covering almost all of his wounds, I recognize him immediately. I have to determine whether I should run to him or if I really do need Slick’s protection. Honestly, it could go either way with the things that have happened between us.

Nash stands across the room, seething and a little twitchy, as he goes chest to chest with the big guy who declared himself the president.

He must sense me or he notices me move in his periphery because he turns his head, immediately locking eyes with me.

There’s shame in his eyes, but also this sense of camaraderie for the things we went through together.

He looks as stuck as I feel, as if he demanded this but never imagined he’d actually get it, and he is now torn on what to do next.

I’m the same exact way, wondering if running and hiding would be best, or if I’m meant to run in his direction.

I make the decision for both of us, stepping around Slick and walking toward him.

Chapter 20

Nash

I hate the silence in the room as she walks a couple of steps closer. I feel like a fucking science experiment with the way everyone is watching us.

She stops right in front of me, within arm's reach, but not touching. Her throat works on a swallow. I want to pull her to my chest but touching her without her permission ever again just can't happen.

Knowing that doesn't stop me from brushing hair from her face and wanting to kill which ever bastard gave her the black eye. It's been days since I've seen her, possibly longer, but it wasn't there last time. She flinches away before I can touch her, and I feel the pain of it to my core. I can't blame her for it. I'd never see it that way, not after what's happened.

"Did Pirro do this?"

She shakes her head, her bottom lip quivering, tears clinging to her lashes as if she's too stubborn to let them fall.

"One of these motherfuckers here?" I snap.

"No," she whispers. "It happened by accident."

My eyes narrow, making her take a step back, and I fucking hate that she seems fearful of me, despite giving her every reason to fucking hate me to my core.

"I hit my face on something when they came into the room. I thought I was going to die."

"You were never in any danger," Kincaid says. I guess I can count myself lucky that he doesn't rip my arm off when I hold my hand up to silence him.

The man may not know it, or he's just ignorant because from Angel's point of view, but he was seconds away from killing her in vengeance of what he perceived she was doing to me.

“I had to make sure you were alright,” I say, knowing the word is subjective to a million different perceptions.

Mistakenly, I reach for her again when she dips her chin to her chest. Three of those burly Cerberus motherfuckers step forward in her defense, and it proves what Angel was saying, that no harm will come her way. They won't even allow an ounce of it from me. It won't stop them from prosecuting her, which is another thing he warned of. I can only imagine what it looked like when they stormed the compound.

I know I wouldn't be here to explain if the tables were turned, and they'd stormed in only a couple of days before and saw what Pirro was forcing me to do. I'm certain her gender, the fact that women are supposed to be the nurturing sex and not the one to do harm, is the only thing that gave her a chance where these men are concerned. It wasn't going to prevent Angel from putting an end to her, so I have to be grateful for them.

She doesn't tell me that she's okay, and honestly, I'm thankful not to be lied to. But standing here silently, while everyone in the room gawks at us, isn't exactly the most comfortable position to be in.

“I hope you're able to heal from all of this,” I say before turning to leave.

I'm at the door, wishing things could be different, when she calls out my name.

With a racing heart, I turn back to look at her, the tears she was fighting staining her pretty face. I told her my name before getting sick after I was forced to hurt her. I wanted her to be able to kill me in her mind. Monsters without names will forever haunt a person. I know from experience how important it is to know who it is that caused so much damage in a person's life.

I feel everyone's eyes darting between the two of us, like we're the afternoon matinee and they're too enthralled by the fucking show we're putting on to go refill their fucking popcorn buckets.

There's judgment in every pair of eyes, and I fight the urge to look around the room to determine which of them are judging her at all. I deserve the blame, but I was also the one found strapped to the fucking bed and drugged out of my fucking head, with my cock standing straight up in the fucking air.

Maybe it's pity I'm reading from the vibes they're sending off, and that pisses me off even more. I didn't ask for it and I sure as hell don't want it.

She doesn't say another word to me before turning around and going back into the room she was in when I arrived.

The woman who tried to block her path earlier follows her and I can see them having a conversation. But the distance between us is just too great in this huge-ass overpriced hotel suite that I can't decipher the conversation.

The female Cerberus member comes out first, and my chest pounds when my blond-haired woman disappears further into the room. Was that her goodbye? Was calling out my name all I'll get?

It will have to be enough, I suppose.

Before I can turn back to the door, she darkens the doorway. An uncontrollable growl rumbles out of my chest when that big motherfucker Kincaid blocks her path. I stand still, barely able to keep from crossing the room as I watch, but he hasn't attempted to put his hands on her. She's frozen in her tracks just by his sheer size.

"You don't have to leave," he says. I can tell he's trying to make the conversation as private as possible, but the baritone of his voice carries across the room.

"Am I free to go?"

"You were never a prisoner," he assures her.

"The fact that you wouldn't let me leave and didn't provide me with a phone to call my sister proves otherwise."

I may end up killing the fucking lot of them. I look around the room, committing every fucking face to memory. I meet the challenge in several of the men's eyes, as if they'll be waiting for me to show up. My blood starts to boil. Although I didn't plan on dying today, it's starting to seem like as good a day as any other.

"Can I go with you?"

I snap my eyes to her, watching as she pulls a zippered hoodie tighter around her middle.

God, I need to tell her no, but how? How do I not give her everything she'd ever ask of me, considering the things I took from her?

I nod, my mouth refusing to work in the moment.

She follows right behind me, and I don't know if I'm the lucky one in avoiding a fight or if the assholes we leave behind are lucky that they didn't push me harder. No one says a word as we walk toward the elevator, but Kincaid is staring at the both of us when we turn to face the front of the car. He looks disappointed, which I consider to be a fucking egotistical reach as far as his connection to either of us are concerned.

I press my back into one corner of the elevator, watching her do the same. We watch each other but neither of us speak. What could we possibly have to say? Words can't fix what we've broken, and she seems to be of the same mindset that it would be wasted energy.

I step off the elevator first, something most fucking idiots would consider rude, going ahead of a female, but if there was fucking danger in the goddamned lobby? People who spout shit about chivalry obviously don't consider all fucking possibilities.

I don't bother giving Ugly a second glance when he spots us crossing the lobby, but he isn't as courteous.

"Ayla," he says as he walks closer, and I fucking hate the man.

I didn't want to learn her goddamned name this way.

It's one more fucking thing that we've both been robbed of, because I never would've demanded it from her. I need it to be something she willingly gave to me after everything I took.

I growl at him, but the fucker either sees how weak I am from weeks of captivity or he's too egotistical to consider anyone could get the better of him.

"You don't have to go," he says, having enough sense not to put himself between the two of us.

"Are you going to keep me from leaving?" she asks point blank.

"Of course not."

She looks at him like she thinks he's as much of an idiot as I do before walking right past him.

I follow her this time, but she freezes just outside the hotel. She has to have been a prisoner for longer than I was. She knew all the ins and outs of the operation. They were able to get compliance out of her. Being free must feel like a trick after so long. I know I was only gone for a couple weeks and the traffic and noise are overwhelming.

I don't know that I'd react at all if I heard someone scream for help because I heard it so many times and was unable to do anything about it even if I were willing.

I walk past her, giving her the option to stay back with the Cerberus assholes or to follow. She asked me to tag along, not the other way around. I'm not going to be the type of man that requests a goddamned thing from her.

I can only imagine how many requests she got that were tainted with the threat against this Alani person she was willing to do anything to protect.

I roll my lips between my teeth as we walk down the sidewalk, away from the hotel, wanting so badly to ask her who that person is to her, but I don't feel like I have the right.

I don't honestly know why she chose this instead of staying. I make a right, walking several more blocks before making another right.

I have a gut feeling she's going to change her mind, and there's no sense in getting her too far from the hotel if that's where she wants to return. I'd never walk away and tell her she needs to find her own way either.

Chapter 21

Ayla

The tip of my toe catches on a crack in the sidewalk, making me stumble.

He notices but doesn't say a word. The clothes I'm wearing were given to me by Slick, shortly after I was brought to the hotel. I didn't understand at the time why I was treated differently than the others. They pulled over a dozen women from Cortez's compound, but I was the only one who accompanied them after they made sure the others were in good hands at a resource center.

I know now it was because of what they walked in on. They weren't going to let me interact with the other women because they didn't know how I was connected. It was just a taste of what Cortez threatened when he said he'd make everyone believe his narrative about who I was. I hate the man even more for it.

I seriously need to stop, but I don't know that he'd pause his steps. I'm pretty sure the man would just keep walking. He didn't look exactly happy that I asked if I could tag along. Maybe I should ask him what his plans are because we've passed the same damn store three times, and honestly, he seems fucking lost.

"I can't," I gasp, the bottoms of my feet burning like fire.

I press my palm into my side, but it does nothing to alleviate the hitch there.

I reach for him, hating the way he jerks away at just the slightest brush of my palm on his arm.

"Sorry," he grumbles, but I shake my head.

"I shouldn't have touched you."

I reacted the same way back in the hotel room but it had more to do with the fact that I didn't want his sympathy. I

didn't want him to feel like he needed to defend anything that happened to me.

“Are you okay?”

I shake my head, grateful he isn't going to waste any more time on a subject neither of us will probably ever want to talk about.

“I don't have the energy to keep going. They didn't... I wasn't exactly given gourmet meals the last four months.”

He blinks in my direction, his jaw clenching, and I can see the battle in his eyes. I can tell he had no idea I was there as long as I was.

“If I never see another peanut butter and jelly sandwich again, I'll die a happy man,” he says, the lack of a smile telling me he isn't joking.

My throat burns at the sight of the frown on his face. I hate thinking that I might be part of the reason for putting it there.

“I'm sorry,” I mutter.

“It's not a problem. We can take a break.”

I shake my head, those pesky fucking tears once again sprouting from my eyes. I could control them so much better under the threat of harm, but now that I should be smiling because I'm free, I can't seem to wrangle them at all.

I refuse to think about the validity of Slick's request for me to get some help or try and talk to someone about what happened. If I thought it would make a difference, then maybe I'd give it a try, but I know I'll be stuck feeling this way for the rest of my life. It'll all be easier to come to terms with if I ever get the chance to feel safe again.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” I mutter, looking around, my eyes darting from one person to the next in an effort not to be caught off guard once again like I was back in Texas.

“Would you like me to take you back? The hotel is only a block away.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “If you know exactly where we are, why in the fuck have you been walking us around in fucking circles for the last goddamned hour?”

He licks his lips, but I can see the smile he’s trying to hide. It sparkles in his dark eyes.

“I realize we haven’t really gotten the chance to talk, but I never took you for the type of woman to have such colorful language.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, not even wanting to evaluate what he thought of me, considering everything that’s happened.

“I don’t have the strength to keep fucking walking in circles.”

“I figured you were going to change your mind. I didn’t want your walk back to take too long.”

I drop down onto the sidewalk, uncaring for the people who may have to step into the street to get around us. I’ve been through a lifetime of hell in the last four months. What do I care if others are just mildly fucking inconvenienced.

“If you don’t want me with you, just fucking tell me that.” I’m second-guessing why I even asked in the first place.

“You’ll go back to Cerberus?” His question is a challenge, as if he’s expected this all along.

“Not a fucking chance,” I answer honestly. I was no less a prisoner there than I was with Cortez’s crew.

“This isn’t exactly the safest place to take a break,” he says, his eyes darting down the street before looking back at me.

“Tell me the plan, while I rest.”

He looks away. “I don’t exactly have a plan.”

I take in a deep, ragged breath, the noise rushing from my nose, making it very clear I’m not happy with his response.

“I want to get back to the States,” I say, imagining that standing on American soil will cure everything that could

possibly ail me. “Preferably Texas because that’s where I’m from.”

He nods as if he thinks it’s not a half-bad goal to have.

“Where did they take you from?”

He meets my eyes. “Here.”

“Monterrey?” He nods.

My eyes dart all over the place. I know anything can happen at any time in any place, but I think I let his presence wrap me in a false sense of security. Hell, he was abducted too.

“Is that why this isn’t a safe place?” I ask, needing to know if it’s fear from before or if he suspects something will happen in the present.

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that there aren’t really any safe places anywhere anymore.”

I swallow, my throat working as I nod my agreement.

“Cerberus is safe. Angel said as much.”

I look away from him, my eyes downcast on my hands as I tangle my fingers together. I know exactly who Angel is, and it irritates me in a way that he’d be friends with someone that was so quick and willing to kill me. But the man doesn’t owe me any favors and loyalty is earned, not just freely given. I’ve done nothing to deserve it from him. If anything, he should hate me for what I’ve done.

“How long will it take to get a passport from the embassy?” I ask, hoping he has a better answer than the one I got from Slick.

“Too fucking long,” he says, anger lacing his tone. “And there’s no fucking telling if any of those pieces of shit are connected to Cortez.”

“Really?” I ask, unbelieving that there are so many bad people despite having witnessed it firsthand the last four months.

“The cartels pay more than any other agency possibly could. People are inherently greedy, and they always feel like they deserve more than they’re getting paid. It’s not very hard to turn someone. Plus, if the cash being waved in their faces isn’t enough, they make threats to the people they care for to get compliance.”

“I know,” I whisper.

He doesn’t question how I’m aware of how the cartels work. I don’t know if he’s just not interested or if I’m putting off the vibe that says I wouldn’t tell him even if he asked. He doesn’t seem like the type to waste time on shit like that.

“So we can’t go to the embassy. How do we get back to Texas?”

I watch as he chews on the inside of his lip, wishing I had access to his thoughts.

“Follow me,” he says, looking like he wants to reach down a hand to help me up but decides against it.

I stand, my feet no less sore for the break that was allowed.

He walks, taking a left at the end of the street rather than the same right we’ve taken numerous times. He doesn’t hesitate to tug open the door to a bar, and like, before, he walks inside first.

I stand as close to him as I can manage without touching him as he pulls out a twenty-dollar bill, handing it over to the bartender in exchange for using his phone.

I was mistaken in presuming he was like me, cashless and out of options. It may actually be possible that he can get me home.

I keep an eye on everyone in the bar, being sure not to make direct eye contact with anyone as he talks on the phone.

I know better than to think being back in Texas will make any difference in how I feel because I was snatched from a town that literally mimics fucking Mayberry. But being in a

place where at least I speak the common language is better than being here.

Chapter 22

Nash

“Glaring at me isn’t going to change a fucking thing,” Angel growls, not even trying to hide his irritation with this situation and Ayla despite her standing only a few feet away. Common courtesy and this man would never be found close together on any level.

I can feel her eyes burning into the side of my head, her own anger a palpable thing between the three of us. No one is happy about this situation and that’s the only thing that’s making it fair.

“She needs to get home just as much as we do,” I say, questioning whether reaching out to him was the right call.

He must’ve anticipated I would ask him for help because he made it to the bar less than an hour after I hung up the phone.

“Listen,” I say as I step closer. “She’s got four-nineteen on the back of her fucking neck. She was taken just like we were.”

God, I wish I knew her story, wish I’d asked who Alani is before he got here. Angel is still firm in his opinion that she’s as bad as Pirro and Cortez. He just can’t accept that she was somehow manipulated into doing what she did.

“If I don’t hate her for what’s happened, then you don’t get the right either,” I say, switching gears. “There’s a difference of nearly a hundred between our numbers. She was taken four months ago. A hundred fucking people in four months, Angel.”

Angel narrows his eyes at me. “I’ve been working relentlessly for months, trying to take that piece of shit down.”

I resist the urge to pull my eyes away. “I’ll continue to help you if you help me with her.”

He locks eyes with me, understanding just how much of a sacrifice I’m making, especially so soon after my own

experience. Angel has had years to recover and wrap his head around what happened to him.

“I was three hundred fifty-eight,” Angel says while looking at her. “With her being four-nineteen, they had a break in abductions. If I didn’t have such an issue with Cerberus, I’d reach out to them to find out what they know about Cortez, but I doubt they’d give me any information.”

“We can figure all that shit out once she’s safe,” I say, knowing neither of us believe any of us are ever really safe.

I’m not going to stand here and run through details when we could be on the move.

“Deal?” I press when he simply stands there looking at her as if she holds some of the answers.

“I can get you to the border, but I’m not guaranteeing I can get you across.”

“Good enough,” I tell him.

I follow Angel to his truck, slowing my steps so as not to get too far ahead of Ayla. She doesn’t seem as eager to climb inside of the cab with him, but eventually makes the decision to leave with us when she settles into the back seat of the quad cab truck. She’s so close to the door, I feel the resistance when it presses to her body as I close it.

Angel doesn’t say a word as he pulls out of the small parking lot of the bar. I can see his eyes darting to the rearview mirror as if he has to keep an eye on her because he’s worried she’s going to pull out a weapon and overpower the both of us.

The woman isn’t broken. She’d been fighting the entire time she was in captivity, only it looked different from what others had to do to survive. I think it makes her stronger, that ability to do horrible things to protect someone else.

It’s as if my energy drains from my body with every mile Angel carries us closer to Texas.

“We’re not being followed,” Angel grumbles after I dip my head once again to look in the side mirror of the truck.

I fight the urge to sleep, the constant rocking of the truck making it nearly impossible. My eyelids are heavy, the insides of them feeling like sandpaper from a lack of decent rest.

I doubt Ayla can sleep either, especially riding in the truck with a man who has made it known he doesn't trust or like her. I'm glad she didn't absolutely refuse the help because I would've had to stay behind with her, and I want nothing more than my own fucking bed.

We're heading east toward Reynosa. I've traveled this road more times than I can count. I'm aware of the dangers, of the bandits that lie in wait for tourists to get lost or run out of gas. Not all citizens in Mexico are corrupt and immoral, but there are enough who are that makes the possibility of trouble very real.

Angel's phone rings, *LAUREN* flashing on the radio console.

Like a model citizen, the guy pulls over to the side of the road, letting it go to voicemail. He doesn't say a word or make apologies as he pulls her number back up.

"Hey," she says, answering after the first ring.

"I'm not alone," he says immediately, making me wonder what the woman would say if she hadn't been warned.

I've witnessed a little of the dynamic between these two and it resembles more of a controlling, obsessive relationship rather than a healthy regular pairing. It's the glint in her eyes when he growls a command that tells me it's perfect for the two of them.

The line goes silent, making me think she has to reevaluate what she's going to say. Angel must read it the same way too because a slow smile spreads across his face, like he's pleased he's been able to throw her off guard.

I shift in my seat. Lauren Vos makes me a little uneasy. For as much as she folds her will for Angel, she has ten times that when facing everything else. She's quite possibly the

strongest, most fearless woman I've ever met, which has to make her submission to Angel one of her more attractive traits.

"We've got eyes on water. Will probably take a dip in an hour or so."

"You may have to reevaluate," she says, understanding exactly what he's saying, despite it being in code. "The pool is closed. Overcrowding. Probably isn't the best time for a dip."

We're heading to the border. The pool they're referencing is the Rio Grande. The overcrowding means company. It could be border patrol or militia. Either way, crossing right now isn't advised.

"That's unfortunate. I was hoping to dive deep tonight."

I roll my eyes and look out the window, knowing the code has taken on a certain level of teasing and some form of delayed satisfaction regarding their sexual relationship.

"Maybe tomorrow will be better for a swim."

"I think the pool will be closed for a few days," Lauren says. "But I think it'll be well worth the wait."

An annoyed rumble bubbles out of Angel's throat. He wants to get back home to his woman and child.

I turn, looking over my shoulder at Ayla, and she doesn't look happy at all. I can tell she understands what the conversation meant.

Honestly, I don't know that the extra precaution is necessary. He's using a burner phone and the likelihood of it being tapped is slim to none, but Angel doesn't take many chances. All of us live an existence with a very healthy dose of paranoia.

I give Ayla a quick smile, one I hope she reads that I'm just as disappointed as she's probably feeling right now.

Sadness fills my chest when she soundlessly breaks eye contact and turns her attention out the window. There's nothing out there to see on this section of road, but she'd rather look at nothing than at me.

Chapter 23

Ayla

I wasn't exactly expecting a five-star luxury hotel, but the outside entry motel whose sign only works three out of every ten seconds is much worse than I let myself consider.

There's no level of safety, no sense of security at the idea of going inside one of those rooms. My skin crawls with just the thought of it, which also makes me feel like a jerk. Angel hasn't once pretended to like me. The man can't stand the sight of me, and I have no doubt, given the chance, he'd put that bullet in my head that he'd planned on the first time we met. Not that I would, but I don't think explaining to him why I did what I did would help.

I stared at the scarred flesh on the back of his neck. The man was just as much a victim of Raul Cortez as Nash and I are. It makes me wonder why he's so hell-bent on hating me. He has to know what it was like, what power they wield over their captives. His hatred is misplaced, although I get a very strong feeling he hates Cortez just as much. He seems to have it in reserves.

As I watch a man leave his room, having to pause just outside the door to hack and cough until he spits something on the concrete, I want to argue that taking our chances with the patrols happening at the border would be the better choice. Any one of these men has the ability to hurt me, and that includes Nash and Angel. Trusting anyone ever again will never happen. After what I've been through, I can't even imagine it.

Angel didn't say a word when he climbed out of the truck five minutes ago. He's not going to assuage my fears or tell me everything will be okay. If anything, I bet, he gets a certain kind of thrill, knowing I'm afraid.

My hands start to tremble when he leaves the front office, wondering if he's going to insist we all share a room. The man doesn't owe me a damn thing, but I hope he dislikes

me enough to at least grab two rooms. As tired as I am, I'd never be capable of sleep if he were in the room with me. Deep down, I think the man is waiting to follow through what Cerberus stopped him from doing two days ago.

I press myself even closer to the door, the plastic molding of the thing digging into my back when Angel pulls open the back driver's side door. His meaty fist clasps the strap of an overnight bag, his eyes darting up to mine. He seems pleased to know that he terrifies me, but at least the man doesn't goad me for it.

"Nash, you're with me," he says, his own irritation abundantly clear in his growly tone. "You got the other room."

The key he tosses my way hits my chest before falling to the seat at my hip.

"We've got 207 and you're in 205," he says before slamming the door back and walking toward the stairs to the second floor of the shitty motel.

"Come on," Nash urges as he opens his door. "I bet you'd like a shower and a good night's sleep."

I climb out of the back of the truck wordlessly. I can't argue with him. I'm in no position to ask for favors, and my head is racing at what Angel will expect for paying for this room.

"The key," I say before he can close the door after I climb out.

I swipe it from the seat quickly, well aware of my vulnerable state when I bend into the massive truck.

My feet are tired from walking so much today, but it's trepidation that makes me catch the toe of my shoe on the cracked asphalt.

Nash slows but doesn't reach out to me, something I'm grateful for.

We walk past Angel when he stops at the iron cage protecting the vending machine from thieves.

“Do you want something?” Nash asks as he hitches his thumb over his shoulder.

“No thank you,” I manage, my eyes zeroing in on the stairs that lead up to the second floor.

I’m not exactly thrilled about this motel, but despite not being completely safe, I know it’s safer out of sight in one of the rooms.

Angel has managed to catch up with us by the time I’m standing outside of room 205. My hand trembles, the key in my grip already slippery from my sweating hand. I feel like crying, the threat of tears burning the backs of my eyes as I try to insert the metal into the lock.

“Are you going to be okay?” Nash asks, his voice low and concerned.

I clench my jaw, knowing that more of my weakness is showing. I don’t answer him as the key finds purchase, and the lock gives way. I step inside, unconcerned about the mildewy smell that greets me. Without a response, I close the door, flipping the lock once I’m able.

I swallow against the threat of vomit, at the way the fabric of the armchair on the other side of the room is somehow both damp to the touch but also dried out and crunchy. I drag the piece of furniture to the door, pressing it under the door handle as if the giant window to the left of the door isn’t there. I know it’s a false sense of security. I know that if there were anyone that wanted to get into this room, they could do so easily without breaking a sweat.

The growl of male voices doesn’t help calm me any as I press my ear to the door.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Did you see the way her fucking hands were trembling?” Nash asks. “She could barely unlock the fucking door.”

“So you’re just going to fucking sit out here all night?”

There's no answer, and I don't have the ability to see what's going on without moving the curtain, something I know won't go unnoticed by the two men outside. The lack of a peephole makes being in here that much more dangerous.

I jerk back at the vibration of a thumb against the door. My hands trembling more than they did when I tried to gain access to the room.

"Fucking ridiculous," Angel growls. "Might as well knock on the fucking door and see if she'll let you sleep in the extra bed."

I'm stone, frozen in place with the man's suggestion.

"Why don't you just go to the room and fuck off?" Nash snaps.

"I don't know which fucking Nash is worse, the one that smiled and thought life was a fucking joke or this asshole."

"Get used to this one," Nash grunts. "The other guy died in Monterrey."

I feel his words deep in my own soul, knowing full well there's no way to recover a hundred percent from what we've both been through. It's not only the physical scars left behind but the mental shit that will haunt us forever.

I'll never get into a car at night without my heart racing, warning me that I'm in danger. I'll never go another day without looking over my shoulder. I'll never be capable of being intimate with a man without thinking of all the horrible things I've done.

I may be out from under Cortez's control, but I'll never be free of him. I know even if I were able to stand over his body and watch the life drain from his eyes, that I'll never feel safe, not the way I thought I was before I was taken.

Chapter 24

Nash

I wince as I jerk awake. The burn in my side makes me realize that me sleeping out here is simply a false show of protection. If someone really wanted to test my limits, they'd know very quickly that I'm not capable of much right now.

I roll my head on the closed door of room 205 to find Angel coming out of his room, the strap of his overnight bag hanging from his shoulder.

I reach for the ache in my neck which only serves to pull at the injuries in my side. I'm a fucking mess right now.

Angel turns in my direction. The unimpressed look in his eyes makes me wonder if the man is going to turn against me. He's set up jobs for me in the past, but we're not friends. I learned long ago to never trust anyone. Despite our frequent interactions, trusting him fully is not something I've ever considered, despite the man risking his own life to pull me out of Cortez's compound.

"What the fuck?" I snap when he pulls his hotel room door closed all the way.

"I have to get back to Lauren and the baby," he says as he steps closer.

"Let me wake Ayla up."

"No," he snaps, making my eyes jerk up to him before I can even get my feet under myself. "Three people crossing at the same time would draw too much attention."

"You got another plan?"

"I told you that I could get you close, but I couldn't guarantee that I could get you across. This is what that looks like."

"It looks like you sneaking out in the middle of the night?"

He tilts his head as if he doesn't understand why I'd be upset, and I have to clench my fucking jaw to keep from saying more.

This man owes me exactly nothing. If anyone owes the other, it's me owing him for the rescue.

"I know you're capable of getting across undetected, but I also know it would be impossible for her to do it."

I hear the truth in his words. I was worried about exactly that before we found out about the extra patrols along this part of the border into Texas.

"You're more than welcome to join me."

I see the challenge in his eyes. He won't stop me from going with him, but it means leaving her behind. He wants me to choose crossing with him tonight.

"Lauren says that border patrol will move on in a few days. If you're going to risk bringing her across, you should wait. I suggest dropping her ass off at the embassy first thing in the morning."

"And risk Cortez having men on the inside?" I shake my head, rejecting the suggestion immediately.

"Do what you want, but that woman isn't my fucking problem. I'm not going to spend another minute without Lauren and my baby."

"You don't want to get vengeance?" I challenge, as he turns to walk away.

Angel spins on his heels, his agility proving that he's in fighting form, the opposite of me right now.

"We'll seek vengeance," he promises, including me in his plan. "I won't stop until Raul Cortez is dead. But sticking around for her isn't going to happen."

He isn't exactly being mean about it. He hasn't given his opinion verbally on Ayla even though it's very clear in his choices how he feels about her.

“Here,” he says, reaching into his pocket, pulling out another wad of cash. “Take this.”

I want to keep my hands at my sides but being stubborn right now isn't smart. Pride, in a situation like this, can get you killed.

He presses the money and the key to room 207 into my outstretched hand.

“The rooms are booked for two days.”

“You'll take this out of my next job?” I ask, already hating the obligation to the man.

He shakes his head. “Gave it some thought. Your job was to infiltrate the Cortez cartel. I would've preferred for you to be on the opposite side from what you actually were, but you did it, nonetheless. This is part of your payment for that job. Lauren will get you the rest once you get back to town.”

“We didn't catch him,” I argue.

“Not catching Cortez was my failure, not yours,” he says before walking away.

I shove the money into my pocket, knowing having it out in the open will only bring unwanted attention. I debate heading into the room he just abandoned, but I doubt Ayla's fear has subsided any, even with me out here. I have no idea how many people were able to walk by me without me waking, and that makes it dangerous for both of us.

I lift my hand, banging on the door with my fist.

“Nash?” she asks from the other side of the door.

It's smart of her not to just jerk the door open but waiting out here longer annoys the absolute shit out of me.

“Open the door,” I hiss.

“What's going on?”

“I'm not going to explain shit through the fucking door, Ayla. Open.”

I stand in silence, no doubt her on the other side, trying to decide if opening the door is in her best interest. It takes a solid minute and a half before the echo of the lock flipping back fills my ears. I don't shove open the door but rather allow her to open it.

She backs away, terror filling her pretty features when I step inside and close the door behind me. I make sure to reengage the lock. Her eyes widen, and I hate that she knows I could hurt her if I wanted to. I've done nothing to calm that fear in her. Explaining that I did the things I did to protect her doesn't negate the fact that I did them in the first place.

I want to call her out on the incongruity of her choices. She chose to leave the safety of the hotel room with Cerberus. She asked to come with me. I never encouraged her to step outside of the safety their cocoon offered. It's very possible she picked what she thought was the lesser of two evils, and I hate thinking that she may consider me one of the bad things in her life that she'll eventually want to get away from.

"Angel left," I tell her.

She settles just a fraction, making me realize that some of her fear stemmed from him.

"We have a couple of options. We can head toward the border and take our chances with the patrols, or we can wait a few days until they move upriver and try to cross then." I release a sigh when she doesn't speak, knowing there's a third option. "Or I can take you to the embassy."

With this suggestion, she shakes her head almost violently, her blond hair swishing, a strand of it getting stuck to her bottom lip. I do my best not to let my gaze drop to it clinging to her, but I lose the battle almost as quickly as I try to fight it.

"We can wait," she says. "If you don't mind."

"I'm not exactly a hundred percent. I don't think taking the chance right now is very smart," I say, instead of assuring her that waiting is no problem.

I want to get home as much as she does, I'm sure.

“Will you stay with me?” I can see the questions in her eyes, and I know she isn’t asking about being in close proximity until we cross. She’s asking if I’ll literally stay in this room.

It has to take a lot from her, but it tells me that she sees me as some form of protection rather than just being someone capable of hurting her again.

“Is that what you want?” I ask, needing to make sure.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she answers. It’s not exactly the assurance I was looking for, but I know it’s going to be the best I’m going to get out of her right now.

“I’m not sleeping on the fucking ground outside anymore,” I tell her as I inch toward the full-sized bed closest to the door. I empty my pockets on the bedside table, needing sleep more than I have the ability to worry about her taking the cash and disappearing. Honestly, if she made that choice, it would make things ten times easier. Not having to worry about her safe crossing means I could be home within a couple of hours of waking up.

She doesn’t open her mouth to argue when I flop face-first on the bed, the injuries on my side screaming out in pain.

A mustiness that threatens to make my stomach turn fills my nose, but the exhaustion I’m feeling wins out against getting back off the bed. It’s better than the accommodation that Cortez and his men provided. Which is saying a lot because this place is an utter shithole. It’s also a little off the beaten path, filled by people who are too concerned with their own problems to worry about what other people are doing.

I turn my head at the sound of the bed springs on the other bed. Ayla situates herself with her back to the headboard, her eyes locked on me. She could very easily kill me in my sleep, but it doesn’t stop my eyes from closing and sleep taking over.

Death could possibly be easier to deal with than the shit I’ve already experienced in life. As I drift to sleep, I still haven’t decided which is a better option—living or dying...

Chapter 25

Ayla

I haven't slept well in months. Some days, I would pray for the prick of a needle, so tired that I didn't give a shit what happened to me while I was knocked out because I knew I was getting the rest my body needed.

Sitting on the bed with Nash only a handful of feet away doesn't offer any more comfort than if he were still on the other side of the door. If anything, it's worse. His low breathing, the sound telling me he doesn't fear me at all, fills the room.

It's annoying in that way that a lover's snores take over the night when they should've gotten dressed after the deed was done. I pick at one of the scars on my forearm, living in the bite of pain that is somehow connected to the underside of my ribcage. How the echo of it spreads out across my body, I'll never understand, but it's always been like that. I scratch at the back of my upper arm, feeling it just below my belly button. This phenomenon was never discussed in nursing school, and I always felt like I was the only one to experience it, so I never asked. I didn't want to be seen as the weirdo, despite my inability to ever really make friends.

I imagine it's why Alani believed me so easily when I explained on that first phone call that I just gave up my entire life in Plano and joined a medical group traveling to Guam. I had no one but her to walk away from. No one left behind asking questions or searching for me. I have no one to blame but myself for my lack of connections. I worked my shift and worried about my sister. I didn't have time for much else. I never ached for any other connections, and that's on me and my codependence on my sister. I think Alani was more than a little happy to go to college. I think she was beginning to feel smothered by me despite the long hours I worked. I thought I needed to protect her from drunk drivers, but apparently, there were all sorts of evils I never considered.

I lose count of how many times my stomach grumbles as he sleeps. I haven't left the room, but I've considered a myriad of consequences if I take a couple dollars from the wad of cash on the bedside table. I'd only go as far as the vending machine on the ground level right under our room, but I know the dangers in that.

I still feel like a captive. I'm attached to this man whether I like it or not because I'm not capable of providing for myself right now. I have no friends, no money, no knowledge on how to get across the border by myself. I'm a female which makes people think I'm easier to victimize, which may be true, no matter how much I fucking hate the thought of it.

I don't even know why I want to get back so badly. Texas doesn't offer any more protection than I have here. If anything, I have even less. Once we get across the river, I don't doubt that Nash will cut ties with me.

Hell, I don't know why he's so fucking willing to help now. Is it guilt?

I should tell him it's misplaced. I've done just as horrific things to him as he's done to me. It should be a wash. My gender shouldn't matter. It makes him no less a victim.

I shake my head, hating to even think that damn word. I hate it as much as I hate the word orphan, but my dislike for both doesn't make either any less true.

Anxiety makes my chin quiver. No money. No family other than Alani, and she's at college. It's not like I can knock on her door and bum a spot in her fucking room.

My apartment was emptied. Hell, they took my car when they took me, no doubt having it chopped to pieces and sold on the black market. Not that a beat-up old Corolla would bring much. If anything, the effort was put forth to keep suspicions being raised about my disappearance.

I have a bank account, and Slick mentioned that deposits were made, but I have no ID, no debit card to use to pull money from that account.

All I ever wanted was normal. It seemed impossible after losing both parents in a tragic accident, and now, it'll never be possible.

I know my eye is still bruised from rolling off that table to get away from the gunfire, and that means I can't go to my sister until it's healed. I have two more days until I can make my scheduled call, and that seems like a lifetime from now. I know any change to the status quo will only bring questions from my little sister that I never want to answer. The call coming from a different number after months of consistency is problematic enough as it is.

My eyes don't grow heavy until after the sun starts to rise, and I know staying awake has more to do with training than nerves. Now that it would be considered okay back at the compound to go to sleep, I find it increasingly difficult to keep my eyes open.

Nash shifting on the bed, a groan escaping his parted lips, makes falling asleep impossible. I know what the man was forced to do, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't have come to the same conclusion on his own. He seems more the type to not have connections to anyone rather than the type to protect someone he cares for, despite Pirro having something to threaten him with.

I feel locked in place when his eyes open. He doesn't blink or look away as he sits on the edge of the bed. He hasn't gotten but a couple of hours of sleep, but I'm envious of what he did manage while I stayed awake and watched him.

As he continues to stare, I can't seem to do anything other than stare right back. Under his scrutiny, I have this urge bubbling inside of me to apologize for everything that's ever happened to him, hating that I'm one more part of his life that he may need to overcome.

I try to look away but find myself unable.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm sorry for everything they made me do to you. I'm disgusted with myself for all of it."

He blinks but remains silent for the longest time before finally speaking. “What do you expect me to say? Should I apologize too? Should I simply ignore the fact that you came so hard when I was hurting you? Should we ignore what our bodies liked while it happened? Do we accept that we’re deranged? What do you want me to say?”

I don’t know why I expected him to keep all of that to himself, as if it were the family secret no one spoke about. Although I have no right, I still feel a little betrayed at his willingness to bring it up.

I shake my head, unable to answer any of those questions.

“Who is Alani?”

I freeze, wanting to have a long conversation about his questions rather than talk about my sister.

He’s got more patience than I ever gave him credit for, because the man just watches me, his eyes traveling a path between my mouth and my eyes.

“My sister,” I answer, wondering if he’s going to end up exactly like Pirro.

She’s the only way someone can hurt me. I realized probably too soon how willing I was to feel pain and degradation in order to keep her safe.

I attempt to hold my head up high, but I know he can see the fear increasing inside of me. My hands grow clammy and my heart is threatening to beat right out of my chest.

“Tell me about her,” he insists, but it doesn’t feel like he’s threatening her. That may be because I’m so desperate to find a connection to someone else. I feel this constant urge to cling to any form of humanity that I can manage. I didn’t find one in Angel, so I don’t know why I’m looking for an ounce of that with Nash.

I cling to the memory of Angel talking about him being carefree, a smile always on his face. What happened to the two of us has no other recourse than to change us from the inside

out. It's not really fair to judge his rough exterior when I'm exactly the same way.

"She's at college," I explain, risking everything on the off chance that this man is actually a good person, that he won't use this knowledge against me like Cortez did from the second he had me in captivity.

"They threatened her." It isn't a question, but rather a statement that he's been capable of deducing from clues given along the way.

"They allowed me to call her once a week. The lie was that I moved to Guam to help with a humanitarian group offering medical assistance to those in need," I explain. "The calls were just another way they controlled me."

"You're a doctor?"

"A nurse," I correct. "I think I would've fought them if I didn't have the threat of losing that connection to her hanging over my head. It was both a relief and a means of torture all rolled into one."

He drops his eyes from mine, but I don't feel the relief I was certain I'd feel.

"Who did they use with you?" I ask, needing to know what connection he had in the outside world that made him so willing to climb on top of me the way he did.

I swallow against the idea that it didn't take much. Some men just have that bad person inside of them. Some are just waiting for a reason to act in certain ways.

I don't know this man well enough to make an assumption in either direction.

"You," he whispers, confusing my sleep-deprived brain even further.

"Me?"

He nods. "Pirro told me that he'd fuck you with his knife if I didn't do it. 'Hurt her a little or I'll hurt her a lot' were his exact words."

“That makes no sense,” I say before I can stop myself.

His lips form a straight line.

“I’m some random woman. There was no reason to protect me.”

He shrugs. “I can’t fucking explain it. I’m not some fucking protector. I’ve never been the one to consider jumping in front of a bullet for someone else. I’ve never met anyone I was willing to do that for. But I knew from the moment the words left that sick fuck’s mouth, that I’d never be able to stand there and watch them hurt you.”

I focus on my hands as I twist my fingers together, unsure of what he expects me to say.

“I have no idea why I was so willing to compromise that part of me, to become something I hate in order to protect you.”

I know exactly what he’s saying. I did that very same thing to protect Alani. I victimized others to keep my sister safe, and it’s something I hated having to do but still can’t bring myself to regret.

“I saw victim after victim come into the emergency room at work with injuries for sexual assaults. I told myself I’d rather be dead than to live and tell about it.”

He looks absolutely horrified by my words. “Ayla, I—”

I hold my hand up to stop him.

“It wasn’t until I was faced with that choice that I realized how weak I was. I didn’t want to die, but I was willing to if it meant Alani was safe. I can’t say that things would be different even if she wasn’t threatened.”

He nods as if he may have struggled with the same ideas.

Chapter 26

Nash

She isn't fishing for compliments. The woman doesn't want to be commended for her strength and willingness to put herself in danger in order to protect her sister. She regrets it as much as she knows it's what had to be done to protect the one she loves.

Knowing she isn't expecting anything from me, I still want to tell her how brave she is. I want her to know the strength and courage it takes to make sacrifices to protect someone else, despite not feeling that way about myself for the things I did to protect her. Protecting her, doing what I had to, made me feel like the scum of the earth. I want to be punished for it. I need her to hate me for it because any level of forgiveness coming from her makes my skin fucking crawl. I don't want her to *understand* why I did it. My reasoning doesn't even sound like reasons, honestly. To my own ears, it sounds like an excuse to take advantage of the situation.

It makes me a fucking sicko for the way my cock threatens to thicken at the memories of what happened between us, of the pleasure I felt when I shoved all the bad shit out of my head to get through it.

I look up, wishing she had hatred in her eyes for me, but there's this unexplainable electric current flowing between the two of us.

We should hate each other. We definitely shouldn't feel some sort of kinship. I know she feels it too because the hairs on her arms are standing on end, and her breathing has changed.

Either one of us acknowledging it out loud is going too far, however.

I'm not unaccustomed to attraction, but it's only ever been as deep as getting laid and getting gone. Emptying my nuts always took care of anything I ever felt for someone of

the opposite sex, and frankly, it kind of pisses me off, this power she has over me without even trying.

I clear my throat as I stand, lifting my arms over my head to stretch my back out. The bed I managed to sleep on for a few hours has left me stiff and aching, but at the same time, it was leagues better than the concrete floor I've slept on for the last couple of weeks.

I need to put some distance between the two of us, but I know I won't be able to manage that until I can get her across the river.

Being near her is making me irritable, on edge, and confused about why I'm feeling any of it to begin with. I want to blame her, but it wouldn't be fair. She's not responsible for how I feel, but that doesn't help those emotions float away either. I probably should've walked away last night with Angel. He was right about her not being his responsibility, and she really isn't mine either. But the surge I feel when I'm close to her makes it impossible to walk away yet.

"We need to go buy some different clothes," I mutter, looking away when I notice her watching me.

I've got to stop all of it. I can't fucking function, getting lost in my damn head. I won't get anywhere wondering what she's thinking or being concerned about how she feels. We may be forced to be around each other right now because, even as big of an asshole that I am, I'm not going to just walk away and make her fend for herself.

"Mine are fine," she says, her voice a low whisper as if she's terrified to voice an opinion, but at the same time is scared that a response was expected by me.

I know she doesn't want to owe me anything. Hell, I feel exactly the same way about everyone else.

I don't argue. Instead, I do something even more fucked up than insisting she let me buy her new clothes. I strip to my skin right in front of her before heading to the bathroom and closing myself inside.

I barely resist the urge to reach for my cock. The insistent throb in the damn thing with the way she watched my erection jutting out from my hips aches in a way I don't exactly hate.

What might possibly turn me on even more is that she didn't look scared, which is a good thing. That wasn't my intention at all. She didn't jolt back or clench her hands into fists as I passed by the bed she was still sitting up in.

I also didn't get the vibe that she was interested in it either, just that it was in some way fascinating to her.

I manage deep breaths through my nose as the sting of water rushes over my skin. A lot of what was done to me has healed, but some of the deeper wounds have a way to go before I can participate in everyday life without them hurting.

Since the water doesn't ever really get hot, I'm not exactly worried about rushing to save her some of the warm water. With what she's been through, I doubt she'd trust me enough to put herself in that vulnerable position with me in the room, even if she wasn't alarmed with me getting naked right in front of her.

It hits me like a lightning strike that maybe she expects me to hurt her again. That she didn't get scared because she's working under the assumption that even though she doesn't want me to buy her more clothes, she still feels as if the balance between us isn't even. And how have women paid for what they need when they have nothing else to offer?

My stomach is turning with disgust as I run the practically useless towel over my skin.

I want to ask her what kind of fucking monster she thinks I am, but I'm certain her experience recently with Cortez, Pirro, and the other men, hasn't given her the best opinion of the male gender at all. It would only be natural to shove me into that same group after what I've done to her already.

I walk out into the room, my argument and assurances on the tip of my tongue, to find it empty.

The clothes I discarded on my trip into the bathroom have been folded and placed neatly at the end of the bed I crashed on for a few hours. Even the comforters have been straightened on both beds.

Ayla is gone, and there's a part of me that feels relief. The guilt that swims inside of me when she's around makes it nearly impossible to function and make informed decisions.

The urgency to find her wins out over everything else, however.

I rush to get dressed and grab my money and the key to the room, going over what I could possibly say to her if I did find her. I don't want to throw it in her face that she asked to come with me, because she might have changed her mind. She doesn't owe me a damn thing, and I need to let her know she's not obligated to me on any level.

This chaotic fucking jumble of emotions is both new for me and entirely unwelcome. I don't want a struggling conscience. I don't want to have to think of anyone else when I'm trying to make decisions about myself. I haven't formed connections my entire life because I never wanted to feel responsible for someone else.

It makes a person weak, just like Ayla has discovered in Cortez's ability to manipulate her into doing horrific things.

But arguing about not wanting it and making that need, that urge to help, dissipate, are two very different things.

I take a deep breath before opening the motel room door, telling myself that I'll get her across the border, but then she's on her own. It's just how it has to be. I can't get tangled up with anything where she's concerned.

I open the door, finding her standing just outside, and with the relieved rush of air that leaves my lungs, so does the vow I mentally made only seconds prior.

Chapter 27

Ayla

“I thought you might want a little privacy,” I say when he pulls the door closed behind him.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” he mutters as he turns to face the door, using the key to click the lock into place.

His face looks scrunched when he turns back around as if the half apology tastes terrible in his mouth.

I swallow and nod. What else could I say right now?

He had no right to just strip down right in front of me. On some level, it’s a violation, and I know that. The woman I was before I was taken wouldn’t have hesitated to ask him what his problem was or let him know he can’t just do shit like that.

Just like he mentioned no longer being the same Nash, I’m not the same Ayla either.

That isn’t the most concerning thing for me. I didn’t question his intentions because him getting naked in front of me didn’t bother me. I wasn’t offended. I wasn’t thinking *how dare you* as my eyes followed him toward the bathroom.

Despite the erection, I didn’t look him up and down and get aroused either. It felt natural, like it wouldn’t be out of character for him to be naked in front of me, and that’s the rub. That’s the part that irritates me more than anything. Cortez was able to change who I was. The treatment and abuse I suffered while in his captivity made me a different person, and I despise the man for it. I should’ve not only been offended, but I should’ve also spoken up against it and put Nash in his place.

I follow closely behind him, making sure to keep my eyes peeled and assessing.

It’s late morning now and the people in this part of Monterrey are moving around looking miserable. I see them as no less of a threat than I would’ve six months ago. I can also

see the pain in their eyes, their struggles with addiction, and their lack of hope for any of it changing.

Before, I'd think they get what they put in. If chasing a high twenty-four hours a day is all they can manage rather than getting clean or finding a job, then that's their own problem.

Now, I have to wonder with the passing of each hopeless person, if they were like me. Did they survive something horrific? Have they used drugs to mask and dull that pain? Did they lose someone they loved more than they loved themselves and this is their existence until they eventually die from it?

"I'll slit your fucking throat," Nash growls when a man with twitching fingers stands in our path.

The guy's eyes dart between the two of us. Although I feel sorry for him, I'm also terrified he's going to hurt me.

"Fucking asshole," the guy mutters as he steps out of our way.

"Maybe he—" I begin after we get clear of the man.

"Don't give a shit about what he's going through. It's not my fucking problem."

I can't help but feel like he thinks of me the same way, and I've done nothing but cling to him since he came to the hotel where I was with those motorcycle people.

"You need different shoes. Your feet have been hurting because they're too small for you."

"Cerberus gave them to me," I tell him. "It was very kind."

He stops and turns to face me. "If they're so kind, then why didn't you tell them the shit they gave you didn't fit?"

I freeze when he tugs at the side of the hoodie I'm wearing.

"This motherfucker is three sizes too big. You have to keep tugging up the waistband of those sweats you're wearing,

and your shoes are so fucking tight, they're cutting off circulation to your toes."

I have no idea how he knows my shoes are too small, but the fact that he figured it out floors me.

"You need new clothes."

"These are fine," I counter, trying not to sound like I'm arguing with him.

He takes another step closer, and I fight the urge to back down. I haven't figured out what he needs to feel powerful yet. I don't know how to act with him to make me less likely to end up on his bad side.

"You can't run in those shoes. Those loose-ass clothes will snag on every damn plant you get close to. I'm not going to end up getting caught by border patrol or some fucking raging militia group because you get tangled up in the brush."

Well, that makes a lot more sense.

"I didn't consider—"

"You think I'm buying you new clothes because I want to see you in some pretty fucking dress, Ayla?" He shakes his head as if he's disgusted by the thought. "Neither of us are up for winning a big goddamned fight, so I need to do everything I can to help make getting across the river easier for us."

I nod. His explanation doesn't exactly leave any room for argument.

The seediness of the neighborhood begins to shift as we walk, turning into a tourist mecca. Neither of us seem out of place as we walk among the other Americans wandering around the shop-lined streets. There's laughter and happiness, dozens of people who have no clue how easy it is to be victimized in the daylight. I used to be one of those people who thought darkness is the only thing that brought out the bad people, but I know better. Despite having been taken at night, I knew a woman at the compound who was snatched from the grocery store parking lot with her baby. That same woman had her child ripped from her arms and didn't know where they took the baby. I was on the housekeeping crew at

the compound, one of the ones responsible for cleaning up the mess after she killed herself.

I cough, an attempt to clear my throat and the tears that threaten. For some, what happened to me was as bad as it gets. Others suffered things greater. But at the end of the day, it isn't about who hurt more. I think it needs to be about survival. I'll never deny that the threat to Alani is the only thing that kept me from doing what that mother did. Cortez somehow knew my limits. I was more valuable to him alive than dead, and he manipulated my love for my sister to keep making money off me.

Deep down, I think the man was worse than Pirro. The second-in-command lost his temper often. He'd get agitated or too high to control himself, and he'd fucking go berserk. It wasn't hard to know what Pirro was feeling. He was always quick to lash out.

Cortez maintained this calm coolness that spoke loudly of his psychosis. He could watch someone die with less emotion than he'd have watching his favorite meal being placed in front of him. The pain he caused others didn't register. He didn't seem to enjoy it, but if anything compromised his ability to earn money, then he removed the problem. It was always as simple as that.

"I find myself doing that sometimes."

I jerk my head in Nash's direction, discovering that we're standing in the middle of the sidewalk, forcing people to walk around us.

"What's that?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Getting lost in my head. We need to keep moving."

He looks like he wants to say more, but I can't chance him chastising me for the memories taking over. It makes me vulnerable, and, despite his confession, I don't see the man getting so distracted by what happened to him that he'd allow himself to be vulnerable again.

"Hungry?" he asks when we near a row of vendor food trucks.

“Starving,” I admit.

He nods as if he approves. I have no doubt he thought I was going to deny it but what would be the point in wasted energy? My stomach has growled no less than a dozen times since we left the motel.

We step in line, Nash choosing a truck that’s selling breakfast tacos.

I watch in horror as the man in front of us smiles as the man selling the food hands him back less change than what he was owed. You don’t have to be abducted for others to take advantage. Hurting people isn’t always about forcing them into sex trafficking.

Nash steps up to the window and places our order. He doesn’t even attempt to speak the native language when the man reaches out for the money.

“I fucking dare you,” Nash growls before releasing the cash.

The man promptly hands back the correct change.

Nash is strong and a force to be reckoned with. I have to wonder if he was like this before or if this is part of the change I heard Angel refer to last night.

Nash doesn’t budge. He doesn’t step to the side as the cook makes our food. He’s ensuring that the man doesn’t tamper with it after being not so calmly called out on his thievery from others.

Nash locks eyes with the man as he reaches into the cooler at our feet, pulling out two ice cold bottles of water. The man doesn’t argue even though these items weren’t on our order.

“We didn’t pay for these,” I say as we sit down on a concrete ledge to eat, not feeling exactly okay with drinking the bottle of water he attempts to hand me.

“They were donated. An exchange for my silence,” he says, placing the water at my hip when I refuse to take it from his hand.

“You should’ve said something to the man he stole from rather than stealing yourself.”

Nash doesn’t make eye contact with me as he holds out the breakfast burrito.

“See that?” He nods, and I trace his attention to a man, clearly American. “Watch.”

It only takes a couple of seconds before the guy bumps into another American who’s leisurely strolling down the sidewalk.

My mouth hangs open as the second man apologizes to the first when he wasn’t the one who caused the collision. The first man says something to him before walking away. I watch in shock as the man shoves the other’s wallet into the inside pocket of his jacket.

I look back to Nash, but he doesn’t seem surprised as he takes a bite of his food.

“We should say something.”

Nash shakes his head. “We’d be here all damn day if we were going to let everyone know they’ve been conned. Plus, how do you think I got the money for this food?”

My hands freeze, the burrito smelling amazing a mere two inches from my mouth.

A smile I’ve never seen before tugs up both corners of his mouth, and he’s no less handsome with red sauce from the burrito on his bottom lip.

“Just kidding, Ayla. Eat.”

“Where did you get the money?”

He tilts his head as he considers my question.

“Does it matter? Will you starve if I told you I robbed some tourist?”

I look from him down to my food, answering him as I take a bite before he answers my question.

“Angel gave me money.”

I don't think he's lying just to placate me.

“The point is to keep an eye out. Anyone can be a victim and anyone can be the perp.”

I nod as I chew, my eyes once again finding the man who was robbed. I feel bad for the poor fucker as he pats every part on his body at one of the food trucks, his eyes darting down the street when he realizes what happened to him.

The person behind him steps up to order the second he gets out of line, unconcerned that the man probably lost every means for him to continue his vacation.

“He'll have a hell of a time getting home. But as much as that sucks, he's not tied up in some sick fuck's dungeon, forced to fuck people to keep someone he cares for safe.”

I refuse to look at him, unsure if he's saying that shit to make me feel better or worse. His words don't help, and I can't understand the purpose of them. Maybe he's just always so crude and inconsiderate.

“Helping draws attention we don't need,” he continues around another bite of food. “Do you know if there was a mini fridge in the room?”

I snap my eyes in his direction, my brain incapable of keeping up with his train of thought.

“What?”

“A small refrigerator?”

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to focus too much on the zing of electricity I feel when the corner of his lip twitches in amusement. The guy's sudden change in moods is making my head spin.

“I know what a mini fridge is, Nash.”

He licks his lips as he watches mine, and I have to look away from him.

“Why are you asking?”

He tilts that handsome head of his once more. “To refrigerate things.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, but I find myself smiling as well.

“Angel said it’ll be a few days before the patrols move a little further north. I’d prefer not to have to deal with all these fucking people more often than we have to. If there’s a fridge, we can grab a few groceries while we’re out.”

“There isn’t a fridge,” I say, rather than tell him how annoying it is for him to explain things to me like I’m a child.

“We can grab jerky and shit then. Come on.”

I follow him to one of the shops, wondering just how much time he spent in Monterrey before getting taken. He seems to know the area rather well.

He pays for shoes and two more changes of clothes without an argument. I grab undergarments for myself when he places a package of boxer briefs in the shopping cart, ignoring the way his eyes lock on the simple panties and sports bra I’ve selected.

At the counter, he pulls a box containing a prepaid phone from the shelf and purchases that as well.

“To call your sister,” he says when I look from the phone to him as the cashier rings him up.

My eyes burn at his consideration. They sting even more when, for the first time since the group rushed into the room killing Pirro and his men, he touches me. It’s a simple squeeze of my hand, but it carries with it a level of reassurance that things will get better that I didn’t know I was desperate for.

He lifts his hand, his intention to swipe at a tear that managed to escape, when the cashier gives him his total.

For some reason, I hate the interruption when he pulls his hand up short, only to reach into his pocket for cash.

“I think you need bandages for some of those cuts,” I tell him as we leave the store.

He looks down at me, another small smile playing on his lips that says he’s aware that I watched him walk naked

into the bathroom earlier today.

“I’m most concerned about the one on your ribs.”

“I’m more concerned about the tattoo on the back of my neck. Do you think you could take it off for me if I got the right supplies?”

“I want mine gone too,” I say, stopping once again in the middle of the sidewalk to look up at him.

“A tattoo cover up would be less painful,” he says.

“I don’t want it on me.”

He nods, understanding completely. I don’t think it would help at all to know that the numbers were still there just not visible.

What I don’t tell him is that my sister knows I’d never get a tattoo. It doesn’t make sense to be afraid of needles as a nurse, but I didn’t get to pick my phobias.

“We’ll do it for each other,” he says as he redirects me to a shop that’s very similar to what a pharmacy would look like back home.

Chapter 28

Nash

“You don’t have to do it this way,” I tell her as she paces back and forth across the room.

She glares at me as if it pisses her off that I’m trying to talk her out of it.

It’s not that I don’t think she can handle the pain. Ayla might possibly be the strongest woman I’ve ever met. I don’t want to be the one to cause her any more pain. Despite the scalpel being sharp as hell, there’s no way around hurting her if it means I’m going to filet the skin on the back of her neck to remove the four-nineteen there.

“How about I go first?” I ask, holding the scalpel out to her.

Her nursing education came out in full force at the store with her insisting on two different scalpels, one for each of us, all the while being absolutely floored with the abundance of supplies readily available for the general public.

She insisted on a round of antibiotics for me, frowning when the clerk asked for a prescription.

When told we didn’t have one, he pulled a prescription pad from under the counter and filled it out, actually taking the time to hand it to me just so I could hand it back to him. Mexico is fucking crazy in some parts.

“I’m only a nurse,” she says as she takes the scalpel.

I don’t hesitate to pull my shirt over my head. I don’t exactly have a closet to pick from if I get blood on it.

It takes a long moment for her eyes to make it back to mine.

“You have so many muscles.”

A grin threatens, but I manage to keep it hidden. I’ve already fucked up more than once today by smiling.

“Thanks?” I say.

She shakes her head. “I just mean after being held captive, I’m surprised to see so much definition.”

She swallows as she looks up at me, and something clicks into place inside of me as I meet her eyes.

“You should’ve seen me before,” I say as I break our eye contact and pull the single chair in the room to the center. “I was a beast. Now I look like a wimpy college boy.”

“You don’t look like a boy,” she says, her eyes widening as she rolls her lips between her teeth.

I hide another grin as she works to get the supplies ready for the tattoo removal.

The scalpel stings as she uses it on the back of my neck, but I do my best not to react at all. I don’t want her terrified when it’s her turn.

I feel the same care in her touch as she bandages my new wound as I felt when she tended to my wounds at Pirro’s insistence back at the compound.

She’s less shaky when it’s her turn to sit in the chair, and I hate the distraction when she, too, pulls her t-shirt over her head.

The ridges of her spine are visible when she tilts her chin to her chest, giving me better access. It makes me wonder what her body looked like before she was taken from her sister’s college campus.

With every whimper I hear as I remove the marks on her skin, I want to slash Pirro and Cortez to fucking pieces. I feel as if I was cheated out of ending Pirro, but there are still so many men left that owe me a fucking debt. As blood flows from the wound I created, I vow to put as many of them six feet under as I can manage.

I follow her directions on how to clean and bandage the wound. Despite the tears in her pretty blue eyes when it’s done, I can also see the relief in knowing it’s gone as well.

We eat some of the food we grabbed at the market wordlessly, neither of us bothering to turn on the television. The noise makes it harder to hear if a threat is coming, and she seems to understand that as well.

After eating, we simply head to our respective beds and crash, the energy used today more than either of us have used in a while.

I don't know if it's her whimpering that wakes me or if I never actually went to sleep in the first place. I forced myself to stay awake until she fell asleep, knowing it would take her some time.

I can't take her nightmares away any easier than I can make my own stop torturing me.

It isn't until the whimpering turns to begging, and then turns to a shrill scream, that I get out of the bed and hover over her.

Her forehead is dotted with sweat, her hands gripping the sheet as if the connection is the only thing saving her.

"Ayla," I say in a normal tone.

She stiffens for a few seconds, her brain trying to figure out where the sound came from, but then she goes back to jerking and making some of the saddest noises I've ever heard.

"Ayla," I snap, shoving at her shoulder with one hand.

Her eyes snap open, but they don't seem very focused. She blinks up at me repeatedly, and I have to wonder if I'm the thing she's struggling with in her nightmares.

I step back, trying to give her some space, but her hand snaps out, clasp ing mine.

She doesn't say a word as I stand frozen at her bedside. As much as I like the idea that she isn't terrified of me, I'm not exactly comfortable either.

"I'm a brutally honest person," I say.

"I know," she whispers, her chin dipping to her chest.

“This isn’t fucking comfortable for me.”

She frowns, her lips looking fucking pouty and perfect.

“It’s the middle of the fucking night, Ayla. We both need to get some rest.”

I fully expect her to release my hand, but instead, she tugs, telling me without words that she has no plans to let me go.

I lie down beside her, but the way our hands are clasped isn’t exactly comfortable either. Instead of mentioning it, I stare up at the ceiling, wondering when I became the fucking type of man that allowed any level of discomfort in order to make others around me comfortable.

Instead of speaking, she tugs me again as she turns to her side, leaving my arm hanging over her hip. She’s made me the big spoon, and I fucking hate how much I like it. I keep my hips a respectable distance from her, but I don’t stop my fingers from flexing at the hint of skin exposed from the way she was jerking and wiggling in her sleep.

I feel her breath escape her lungs, and feel the tension leave her body as we settle.

Despite realizing how big of a mistake I’m making, I simply close my eyes. The arm I’ve wedged under my head doesn’t take long to fall asleep, but, despite knowing how much it’s going to ache when I get up, I don’t say a fucking word about the discomfort.

All of this is a huge fucking mistake. The biggest part is staying here behind her after realizing exactly how much I fucking like the warmth of her body touching mine.

Chapter 29

Ayla

I let myself sink into the comfort he offers, trying to force myself to imagine this being like one of the many romance novels I read before I was taken. Having no love life to speak of, I lived vicariously through the heroines in those novels.

Forced proximity, imagining there being only one bed, being trapped in a place with a very sexy man.

But this isn't a love story. We aren't stuck in a snowstorm or trapped on a broken elevator. We aren't locked in a museum overnight.

We were both abducted, held captive, tortured in the most devious ways. We were broken, left in pieces.

There's no happily ever after for either of us, especially not one that ends with us being together.

Knowing all of that doesn't make me climb out of the bed and put a little distance between him and me.

I simply squeeze my eyes closed a little tighter and try to escape the reality of being trapped in another country because I don't have the proper documentation to get back to Texas. I don't want to focus on the burn at the back of my neck from the wound there. I don't want to face the truth of any of it.

No, this isn't a romance novel. I'd classify it as a tragedy. Something more likely written by Shakespeare or Poe. I don't, however, think either of those men could imagine something so devious and monstrous.

He shifts slightly, the distance he started with last night having grown much smaller, bordering on nonexistent now.

I hate myself for the reaction my body has to his touching me.

There's nothing sexual in the drape of his arm over me. He isn't trying to cop a feel even though two of his fingers are dangerously close to the apex of my thighs.

I hate Cortez even more in this moment. I shouldn't be capable of arousal any longer. I shouldn't let thoughts of anything sexual infiltrate my mind, not after what I suffered.

It makes me wonder if they managed to train my body to want the things that happened to me.

I stiffen, shoving those thoughts away the second they enter my head.

I never wanted any of the stuff that happened to me. I wasn't trained to orgasm or any bullshit like that, but I still managed it without even thinking about it with Nash.

My breathing stutters as I'm flooded with those memories.

It feels like more of a violation now, the way he pulled that response from my body. It was bad enough that he was commanded to hurt me in that way. But to make it seem like I liked it?

I swallow down the threat of tears, because, even as I think it, I know I'm lying to myself.

I saw the hatred for what he was doing in his eyes, but I also saw the way he reasoned with himself. He rolled his thumb against me for my benefit, not because he wanted to feel a little better about what he was doing. It was selfless not selfish.

It doesn't make us soulmates. It just means that he's skilled in the way he touches a woman. That thought shouldn't send a zing of awareness through my body but denying it doesn't make it any less true.

The connection I feel with him is about shared experiences and nothing else. Despite reading romance novels and letting myself imagine one day falling head over heels in love with someone determined to sweep me off my feet, I knew it to be unrealistic.

I mean, I literally got swept off my feet in that fucking parking lot and look where it landed me for the last four months.

The twitch of his fingers against my skin makes me stiffen even further. They caress the exposed skin on my stomach, and it makes me wonder if he's just pretending to be asleep. The erection he's pressing against me could be simple biology or it could be because he's awake and expecting payment for comforting me last night when I had a nightmare.

His arm tightens his hold on me when I try to pull away, but it only lasts a second before he releases me.

"Fuck," he grunts. "Sorry."

I feel like I'm one step away from losing my mind when he rolls away from me. A second ago, I needed to escape him. It's a testament to how seriously fucked up about all of this I am right now.

The angle of the sun through the thin, faded curtains startles me.

I reach for the phone Nash bought for me yesterday, verifying my fear. We slept much later than we should've. I don't exactly have a schedule to keep. There's only one thing I've done consistently since being taken, and I've somehow managed to fuck that up as well.

My hands are shaking as I dial Alani's number. It's my first call since I regained my freedom. As much as I want to keep her safe from all the terrible things that have touched me, I also want to confide in someone I love.

I ache to leave the room, so I can finally have a conversation with her in private, something that was never allowed back at the compound. Cortez or Pirro would practically stand over me, a nonverbal threat to not give more information than was allowed.

After watching so many people get victimized in broad daylight yesterday, I no longer possess the courage I had when I left the room while Nash was showering yesterday.

I settle for the chair that we both took turns sitting in yesterday as the cattle tag tattoos were removed. I feel his eyes on me, but I can't seem to manage to look in his direction.

The call connects, but my sister doesn't open the conversation with her thoughts like she normally does.

"Alani?" I ask, terror filling my blood that my rescue from Cortez's compound was traded for her demise.

"You're calling from a different number," she says, her voice flat.

I hate that she doesn't get as excited as I am each time I'm able to speak to her, but it's the difference in our current experiences to blame for her lack of enthusiasm. I have no doubt she sees these calls as just one more way to keep her under my thumb.

"I'm using a different pay phone," I lie.

"It's from a different area code," she challenges, irritation evident in her tone.

"We've moved to a different village."

Her silence feels like a chasm I'm never going to be able to cross. I want to chide her, to explain that her attitude isn't necessary, that it's actually extremely disrespectful, considering what I've been through for her. But wasn't protecting her from all of it the entire fucking point?

I did what I did so she could live her life in the dark, unaware of the horrible things people are capable of.

"Another one where you can only call once a week?"

"I think I'll get to call more often here," I say, my skin growing cold at her increasingly annoyed tone.

"Like between filming?"

I freeze, my hand the only thing seemingly alive as it trembles, the shake in it so bad, I nearly drop the phone.

"Wh-what?" I manage.

“Are you really going to act all innocent now, Ayla? I’ve seen the videos. I have no fucking clue who recognized you and sent them to me or why they were sent on a VHS tape like it’s the damn nineties. It took me a long time to find one to play it back on, and honestly I hate that I did. The sick shit you’re into? I can see why you’ve been lying to me about where you are.”

“Alani,” I manage.

“It’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen in my life, Ayla. Mom and Dad would be mortified.”

“I—”

I snap my mouth closed when she hangs up, unwilling to waste energy I don’t have, speaking into the disconnected call.

Tears rush down my cheeks as I bend my face forward, trying to muffle my pain.

Chapter 30

Nash

Tears are one thing. I saw them last night as she tried to fight the pain as I peeled the numbers from her body, but the sobbing draws me out of the bed.

The call to her sister didn't last long, but it's clear that it damaged her even further.

She turns away from me when I approach, and I hate the fact that she does it so easily. I know better than to think holding her last night formed any sort of bond between us, but the speed in which she makes it clear I'm not welcome is like a slap to the damn face.

I refuse to let her get lost in her head. There's too much shit from the past in there, and I can't let her ruin her present because of it.

I haven't met her sister, but whatever the spoiled fucking brat said to make her this upset fucking pisses me off.

"What the fuck happened?" I growl, clenching my jaw when she jerks. I try for a different tone, not wanting her to take my anger at her being upset personally. "Why are you so upset?"

"S-someone recognized me online. Th-they s-sent her videos."

Something akin to hatred grips my chest, making it difficult to take full breaths.

"Someone?" I ask, because the timing is a little too suspect.

She nods. "They sent them on VHS tapes, and she somehow managed to find a VCR."

"No one recognized you," I tell her, because letting her believe she was betrayed by someone other than who it actually is would be fucked up. We've dealt with enough bullshit to add to the pile. "One of Pirro's men did this."

She blinks up at me, her eyes and cheeks shining with tears.

“Pirro?” she asks, her head shaking. “He’s dead, and he works for Raul. They all work for Raul.”

I didn’t realize that I never confirmed who was behind that fucking house of horrors until she speaks his name.

“Cortez.”

She nods. “That was his organization. Do you really think he’s the one who did it?”

She seems more terrified now than she did a few moments ago.

“They could’ve easily sent it in email or as a video to her cell phone, but it would be easier to track it that way. They didn’t want a digital footprint. The cartels have been using low tech means to threaten people since that tech was invented. Why change it if it isn’t broken, you know?”

The quiver in her chin increases. “Cortez? Really?”

She’s bordering on hysteria.

“Alani isn’t safe,” she says as she jumps up from the chair, the back of her arm swiping at her tears as if her own safety and emotions no longer matter.

I know it isn’t normal to go through life with absolutely no fucking connections. I know the way I’ve lived as long as I can remember would confuse people. I don’t exactly understand her getting so upset about someone else, but I also can’t just ignore it. The things this woman was willing to do to keep her sister safe means she’ll continue to do them, and that could compromise me.

I don’t try to understand why I want to help her or why seeing her upset affects me more than anyone has ever had the ability to do so.

“I thought she was safe. Slick said that they had someone keeping an eye on her.” I watch as her eyes dart around the room. “I’ve been so selfish. I’ve been worried about reaching out to her and not telling her about what

happened. I never considered that he'd follow through with their threats. We have to go. I have to go to her."

I want to ask just what the fuck she thinks she's capable of doing to protect her sister from such a monster, but I don't think it will be received very well.

"He could already have her," she says, her chest heaving with the beginning of another round of sobs.

"He doesn't have her. You just got off the phone with her," I remind her. "Did she sound any different?"

She doesn't pull away when I press my palm to the top of her shoulder.

"She hates me. He told me he'd do this, that he'd make her believe I'm a horrible person. He threatened to send tapes to the cops, to make it impossible to return to my normal life. I never expected to be free, and I was okay with that so long as she was safe. Nash," she gasps. "She doesn't even know she's in danger."

I fight the urge to rip the phone from her when she presses redial to call her sister back.

Her eyes squeeze closed a second later.

"The call won't even connect. She blocked the number. We have to go get another phone."

I take the phone she shoves in my hand as if she's trading it for the new one she expects.

"Knowing Cortez sent videos to your sister doesn't clear the border. We still won't be able to get to her today, and possibly not even tomorrow."

She shakes her head as if she refuses to accept the truth.

"Let me make some calls. I'll see if I can get someone to her who can actually keep her safe."

She takes a deep breath, but instead of arguing like I fully expect her to do, she nods, falling back onto the chair as if she no longer has the strength to stand.

For some unexplainable reason, I want to fix this for her. I want to be her hero, to save the fucking day. I want her to see me as someone other than the guy who hurt her a little to keep someone else from hurting her a lot.

This is a new experience for me. Any other time, I'd walk away. If it didn't benefit me in some way, I'd just ghost. I don't go looking for trouble, and I'm never willing to put myself in danger unless the pay is good enough. Don't get me wrong, I want to end evil. I want to rid the world of every sick fuck that walks on it, but I'd never do it at the expense of myself.

Until her.

I also know, as sure as I stand right here, that if I don't try to get us back to Texas tonight, she's going to leave on her own. She may look like she's complying right now, but I can see her mind working, making a plan to get back to her sister.

"Angel," I grunt, the second the man answers the phone.

"Don't tell me you're already needing more help."

I remain silent. Only a couple of seconds into the phone call and I'm already thinking it was the wrong move to make.

"Quit being a dick," Lauren says from somewhere near him.

"What can I do for you?" Angel asks, his customer service voice annoying me more than his jab at needing help.

I close my eyes in frustration, reminding myself that this isn't about me. This is for Ayla.

"Alani, Ayla's sister, was sent a VHS tape."

"Fuck," Angel snaps, knowing exactly what it means.

"Yeah," I agree. "Ayla, I need details about your sister."

She faces me.

"She's at college," I begin, drawing from the information she's already disclosed to me. "I need someone watching her until we can get there. Do you have anyone available?"

“I’ll see who I got and will send them that way. But, Nash—”

“I know,” I say.

We don’t have to discuss the very real possibility that Cortez acted first and sent the videos later, or he somehow knows we haven’t left Mexico and plans to go after Alani before we can get to her.

Angel listens as I relay the information Ayla gives me about Alani.

After the call ends, I urge her to stand in front of me.

“I know you’re going to want to leave tonight, but he’s sending someone to help her. We can’t risk getting caught or arrested. It won’t help Alani if you end up dead or behind bars.”

She nods as if she agrees but I know it won’t keep her from thinking she’s more capable of getting across the border than she actually is. Her fear is making her think she’s stronger than she is.

“We need to get some supplies.”

She nods, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull on the shoes I got for her yesterday.

I grab my boots as well.

She doesn’t keep the same distance she kept when we walked into the market area that she maintained yesterday, and after the second brush of her hand against mine, she curls her much smaller hand into my palm.

We don’t say a word. We don’t mention the connection.

It’s not just the physical touch that I can’t wrap my head around. It’s the soul-deep affinity I seem to have for this woman. We cut each other deeply with the things we were forced to do, but neither one of us are asking for forgiveness.

She did what she did to protect her sister. I have no doubt that she’d do it all over again, just like I would to keep Pirro from hurting her.

The hand holding is far enough, so I have no idea why I lift her hand and press my lips to the back of it.

Chapter 31

Ayla

I don't know how I convinced myself that Alani was safe. I knew it was a risk the second Cerberus pulled me from the compound, but it's not like I could've demanded that I stay. Every person that helped Cortez run that place was killed. I watched from inside one of their SUVs as they lined the bodies up outside.

Cortez wasn't in the mix. Pirro had said as much the day before. The boss had left on a business trip which I have to presume is him making the rounds to check on his other compounds.

I thought not telling her what happened would maintain her safety, but Cortez got to her first. She hates me. She thinks I'm some sort of pervert that's been lying to her for months while I made pornographic videos. I shudder at the thought of her watching anything I've been forced to do. I have no doubt he sent her some of the most extreme stuff. His goal, of course, would be to drive a wedge as far between us as he could manage, so he wouldn't start with the vanilla stuff. He threatened me with this. I guess I just thought with my months of compliance that he'd leave her alone.

I jump at the sound of a horn outside the room, my eyes locked on the door as if someone will kick it in at any moment. I've been jumpy since Alani hung up on me two days ago. As insistent as I was to get to my sister, I had to trust that Nash was doing everything he could to get me back to her. With the militia and border patrol where we needed to cross in Reynosa, all we could do was wait until they moved on.

Nash left the room over an hour ago, saying he needed to line some things up, but there's a real possibility he deemed me too much trouble and just took off. Maybe the phone call he made two days ago was the limit of his willingness to help. Despite the threat of overwhelming emotion threatening to clog my throat, I know the man doesn't owe me a damn thing. Expecting anything from him is misplaced.

The horn blares again, but I refuse to climb off the bed and look out the window. Nash was very adamant that I stay inside and he'd be back shortly to get me. I don't think he'd find a vehicle and honk for me to come outside and join him.

I try to ignore the insistence that he's the one out there and if I don't go, he'll take off and leave me.

An engine revs before the sound of tires squealing filters into the room. The silence that follows makes me shake even harder.

I've been an independent woman for years. Even before my parents died, I did things on my own. I wasn't exactly the most social person, but I never thought twice about getting things done. I wasn't scared out of my skin with the thought of looking out a damn window.

My chin trembles when I realize that I'll never actually be free from Cortez. The things they did to me, the things they made me do, have changed everything about me. The trauma will follow me to the grave, and knowing it makes me hate him even more.

I was a fool for thinking I could just return to my life, maybe get some counseling to work through all of it.

I wipe my eyes with the backs of my hands but I can't even seem to fake a little bravery right now. I'm not prone to pity parties and feeling sorry for myself. I was never afforded the luxury, having so many responsibilities after my parents' car accident. Alani was my focus. She's always been my focus, and now she hates me.

I take a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm myself. If she's safe, she can hate me all she wants.

Lost in my own head, I have to clap my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming when the doorknob turns. Standing in the open doorway, Nash watches me as if he's afraid to get any closer.

“Ayla?”

I attempt one last time to dash the tears from my face with my hands, but realize I'd be better off saving my energy

for something I can control, because this clearly isn't one of them.

"You came back," I whisper.

"I told you I would," he says, a hint of irritation in his voice for having doubted him.

Now isn't the time to explain that my parents said they'd see me after my class. The plan was to meet at one of their favorite restaurants. It was a Tuesday tradition, one that Alani started skipping out on, claiming to be busy with after-school projects.

Before the accident, I was annoyed that she was putting distance between herself and the rest of us. After the accident, I was never more grateful that she wasn't in the car with them that evening.

"I don't do well with promises," I confess.

He nods, just one simple, quick dip of his head as if he completely understands.

"We have to go."

Instead of questioning his plan or grilling him about where he's been for the last hour or so, I climb off the bed, not bothering to look back and make sure I didn't miss anything. He instructed me to pack everything up, which was only the change of clothes we each have and the small amount of food and water we haven't consumed yet.

The bag he brought from the market is sitting beside the door. He doesn't hesitate to lift it up, his huge hand gripping the strap.

Nash points toward a double cab truck idling in the parking lot, but I'm no more enthusiastic to climb inside this one than I was the one Angel was driving. I don't recognize the man behind the wheel.

"Can we trust him?"

Nash shakes his head. "Probably not."

I freeze, glaring at him. "Seriously?"

He shrugs. “Just being honest, but I swear I’ll keep you safe.”

I watch as he runs his hand down his shirt, not knowing exactly how to feel when he shows me the handgun tucked into his waistband.

“We’re both going to ride in the back. If he tries any funny shit, I’ll put a bullet in his head.”

It should bother me that Nash would be so quick to kill someone else, but his willingness to do so actually makes me feel a little safer.

“Look at him like an Uber driver or something,” he urges as we walk closer. “We’re paying him for a service. Only if the trip sucks, he ends up dead rather than getting a low review.”

“That’s awful,” I tell him.

“That’s incentive to make sure we’re pleased with the service,” he argues, opening the back door of the SUV so I can climb inside.

The man doesn’t even bother looking back at us as we settle on the back seat, and it makes me wonder if Nash already threatened him before coming back to the room to get me.

He doesn’t reach for my hand as the vehicle pulls away from the motel like he did when we were walking back to the market to get supplies earlier. I think the lack of connection is what makes my mind race with all the possibilities.

I want to believe Nash could protect me, but at the end of the day, he was one of Cortez’s victims too. I don’t get the vibe from him that he was ignorant to all the terrible things in the world before that happened either. I don’t think his diligence and ability to spot the bad people, like he pointed out at the market, stemmed from that abduction. So, if he was aware of what could happen, then why was he taken?

The trembling starts right at the center of me, the unease not taking long at all to make its way to my arms and legs.

“Turn up the heat,” Nash snaps, noticing the way I twist my fingers together.

My jaw aches from trying to keep my teeth from chattering together.

“You okay?” he asks, his lips close enough to my ear that I feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek.

“F-fine,” I stutter, pulling a disbelieving scoff from his lips.

He presses his palm to my leg, his hand running up and down the length of it. I don’t tell him that I’m not actually cold, that it’s fear taking over.

We’re on the road for what seems like forever, but in all honesty, it’s probably just over an hour.

“Almost there,” Nash assures me. Five minutes later, the vehicle turns off the road, the beam of the headlights fading out in front of us.

When we come to a stop, Nash takes the time to look around, his gaze traveling over every window as if he’s expecting an ambush.

“No *policía*,” the man says without looking back at us.

Before climbing out, Nash places a stack of bills on the console at the man’s elbow. I scramble after him, knowing I may not be completely safe, but I’m safer by his side.

The driver doesn’t hesitate to pull away the second the back passenger door is closed. It leaves us standing in utter darkness.

I blink into the blackness as if my eyes are the problem rather than being in an area devoid of any form of civilization. The moon doesn’t offer much help as it tries to shine from behind the clouds.

Nash crouches, rustling through the bag we brought from the motel room.

“Here,” he says, pressing a flashlight into my hands.

It doesn't work like I expected when I turn it on. It has a red film over it.

"It'll help maintain your night vision and it's difficult to see from a distance. I need you to keep close, and not say a word. This isn't time for conversation."

I swallow down a rebuttal, despite my urge to tell him I fucking know this isn't the time to chat. I blame my nerves on the agitation coursing through my veins.

I understand his explanation about my clothes as we walk, the sound of the slow rolling river guiding us forward. The brush and vegetation, although dead due to the winter season, still grips and clings to what I'm wearing. We'd be slowed down even more if I were wearing the baggy clothes Cerberus donated to me.

The water is freezing, but I somehow manage not to make a sound when it laps at my shoes.

Nash grips my hand as we make it to the center of the river, the water up to my breasts, the chatter in my jaw no longer due to fear but the chill.

I feel disgusting and frozen to the bone by the time we reach the other side of the river. I still don't speak, knowing we aren't exactly in the clear just yet.

Nash still hasn't let go of my hand, and I have no plans to pull away from him anytime soon. We don't make it a hundred yards from the river when headlights shine directly at us.

Nash keeps walking, our arms stretching out, our connection unbroken as I freeze, literally caught in the headlights.

"Now is not the time," a voice says in the distance.

"It's Angel," Nash assures me, but knowing it isn't border patrol or the militia doesn't exactly bring any more confidence in my safety.

Angel hates me, and I know that the help we're receiving is because of his connection to Nash. He'd no doubt

drown me in the river if he got the chance.

“Where’s Lauren?” Nash asks once we reach the truck.

“At home, pissed because I wouldn’t let her come,” Angel grumbles. “Gonna hear about it for a week. Get in so I can get back to her.”

Nash opens the back door of the truck, handing over a blanket before wrapping himself in one. Instead of sitting up front with Angel, he climbs in the back with me, a tighter squeeze than the previous vehicle, due to the infant car seat against the far side of the truck.

Nash wraps his arm behind my back, his hands rubbing up and down my arms, as if he’s trying to rid my body of the chill I feel like I’ll have every second, for the rest of my life.

Not much is said as Angel drives, and before long, we’re pulling up to a small house. In the darkness I can tell that we aren’t in the best neighborhood, but we’re not met with any noise as we climb out of the truck.

“Thank you,” I tell Angel instead of arguing and insisting that he drive me to Alani in Lindell.

Angel grunts in return as we climb out of the truck, leaving us standing on the sidewalk as he drives away.

“Let’s get inside,” Nash urges, walking toward a dark house.

I move a little faster when I hear the screech of an angry cat down the block.

I’m second-guessing my choices when the man bends and pulls a key from under the tattered doormat on the porch.

“Why are we here?” I ask once we step inside.

Nash flips a light switch. The single bulb in the middle of the room doesn’t reveal much.

The house is tiny, the kitchen flowing into the small living room that houses a love seat, a single side table and a console table with an outdated television on it. Two doors on

the far side must lead to a bathroom and a bedroom. The back door is no more than twenty feet from the front door.

“We both need showers. We need to eat and get some rest. We’ll head to Lindell first thing in the morning.”

I shake my head, disagreeing with his plan from the first word that leaves his mouth.

“I want to go to my sister.”

“Angel sent someone to look after her. She’s safe. I assure you.”

“Nash,” I argue, trying to swallow down the fear when he inches closer.

“Your lips are blue from the river. You’ve barely slept.” He brushes his fingers over my cheek. “You’re going to have to have a very long, very upsetting conversation with your sister. You need more strength than you have for that. I’ll grab the first shower.”

Without another word, he turns around, carrying the overnight bag into the door to the right.

I don’t know if he’s giving me the chance to run or what.

I make sure the front door is locked, moving the love seat in front of it before moving the tiny kitchen table in front of the back door. I’m well aware that all I’m doing is creating a false sense of security, but it does calm my nerves a little.

While he’s in the bathroom, I explore the other room.

A small dresser, an empty closet, and a queen-sized bed are all that complete the room. The linens on the bed look clean, but there are no personal affects to be found.

Nash finds me standing in the bedroom doorway when he’s done with his shower.

As much as I want to go to Alani, I know he’s right about getting clean and getting some rest.

My shower is quick, the masculine scent of the bodywash and shampoo making my stomach turn. It’s all we

were offered back at the compound. I know it's a petty thing to concentrate on while there are so many other things that need my focus.

For all the house is lacking, there are actually two towels hanging on the towel rack. I use the one Nash didn't use to dry myself, before pulling the baggy clothes Cerberus provided out of the overnight bag.

When I'm dressed, I find Nash already in the bed.

"Don't overthink it," he says, holding the blanket open for me to climb in with him.

I don't waste a second climbing under the covers.

Chapter 32

Nash

Despite wanting to say something about the way her fingers are drumming on her thighs, I keep my mouth shut. She told me she doesn't do well with promises, and I know exactly where she's coming from. Promises require trust in the person making them, and that's something I've never bothered to waste my time on.

My phone rings, the sound echoing through the vehicle from the connected Bluetooth.

I don't recognize the number, but I press the button to connect it anyway.

"Yes," I say.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"On our way," I say, recognizing the angry growl of Donovan's voice.

"You were supposed to be here hours ago," he says.

"We got a late start," is all I offer in explanation.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," an unfamiliar masculine voice says from his side of the line.

"Who the hell is that?" I snap, sensing Ayla tense up in the passenger seat.

"A complication."

"Donavan," I hiss. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. I'm sending you an address."

"Piece of shit! Let us go!"

"Donavan," I growl again.

"I haven't hurt anything but these sissy bitches' prides," Donavan snaps.

“Sissy bitch? I’m a fucking United States Marine,” a guy in the background yells.

“Hurry the fuck up. I’m tired of babysitting.”

The line goes dead, and I can feel Ayla glaring at me, her way of demanding an explanation, but I don’t have one to give.

“Motherfucker,” I grumble as I turn off the cruise control and press the gas pedal harder.

Daylight savings time is a real bitch, especially this time of year when the sun starts setting before evening can even take hold of the day. It’s dark by the time we get close to the address Donovan texted, the locked gate keeping me from driving my truck straight up to the house.

Ayla doesn’t listen when I tell her to stay in the truck. I’m not sure if it’s a need to be near me or the need to see that her sister is safe that makes her climb out of the cab.

She’s ignorant to what’s going on around her, but I sense the extra people surrounding the house the second she meets me at the front of the truck.

Movement to my right and left tell me we’re outnumbered, but Ayla has no level of combat experience. I’m thinking we’ve been led right into a trap, wondering what the price was for Donovan to turn on us.

“Don’t even think about it,” a voice growls in my ear, cold steel pressed to my temple before I can reach for the gun in my waistband.

They pull it free, leaving me completely helpless and incapable of protecting her. It seems she was right to not accept the promise I made about her or Alani’s safety.

“You keep popping up like an untreated rash.”

I snap my head to the left, recognizing the motherfucker there.

“Are you fucking serious?” I snap at Kincaid, the tatted-up asshole president of that fucking do-gooder biker gang.

“Why are you here?”

“We could ask you the same thing,” he growls, before saying, “Stand down, at least for the time being.”

“Ayla?” a female asks, reaching for my companion’s arm.

Ayla moves out of her reach, pressing closer to me.

“Don’t touch her,” I warn, feeling only a little better when the woman holds her hands up and takes a step back.

I no longer have any weapons aimed at me that I can see, but I have no doubt there are others in the shadows, just waiting for the command.

“We’re here to get her sister,” I explain.

“We had people protecting her,” Kincaid argues.

“You’ll have to excuse me for not trusting that Alani’s well-being was a top priority.”

“The man inside took her and three others,” Kincaid says, stepping a foot closer as if the intimidation tactic will work on me.

“So, you’re admitting that they couldn’t protect her?”

Ayla tightens her grip on my bicep, and I know I’m not going to get anywhere out here, arguing with these guys.

“Donavan is inside. Angel asked him to keep an eye on her.”

“He took her,” the woman commando snaps.

“My godson and his husband are inside, along with another male,” Kincaid says. “I’m not very impressed with how your guy—”

“Not my guy,” I clarify. “I doubt he hurt them.”

Kincaid doesn’t seem any more relaxed than he did before disarming me.

“Let me go inside and deescalate the situation. Donavan wouldn’t hurt them if they weren’t a threat to Alani.”

I'm surprised when Kincaid takes a step back and sweeps his hand, palm facing up, toward the house.

"Ayla," the female says when she keeps step with me as I walk in that direction.

She doesn't bother to even look back at the woman, and that makes me feel a sense of pride I don't deserve. Loyalty from her, after what we've been through, is just too much to hope for.

I shoot off a text to the number Donovan called me from, letting him know that I'm here and not to fucking shoot me when I come inside.

The room is nearly as dark inside as the night is outside, and I know that's purposeful. I have no doubt Donovan has a count on exactly how many people are outside, preparing to enter the house.

I lock eyes on the three guys tied to chairs on the other side of the room.

"Seriously?"

Donavan steps in close, his chest brushing my arm. "If I'd known I'd end up on the wrong side of Cerberus, I never would've agreed to this shit," he growls.

"Just put your gun away. They're pissed at what you've done, but they're not to the point of blowing your head off just yet."

I don't know why I thought for a second Cerberus would give me the full opportunity to deescalate the situation. They're at my back, flooding into the house the second Donovan's immediate threat is neutralized.

Donavan is glaring at me as he lifts his hands up beside his ears. It's a vow that I haven't heard the last of him about this whole thing. I nod at him, telling him I understand.

"Pretty fucking stupid," Kincaid says to the man that abducted his godson and three others. "I should shoot you where you stand."

Donavan doesn't say a word. He simply looks over the president's shoulder, his eyes locked on the woman tied to a chair. Alani is just as pretty as her older sister, but there isn't fear in her blue eyes as she narrows them on the man across the room.

Chapter 33

Ayla

I feel frozen in place. I want to run to my sister, to make sure she's okay, but she hasn't pulled her eyes from Donovan as Kincaid gets in his face.

The man stares right back at her, and it makes me wonder what happened between the two of them. Trusting a man not to exert his power over a woman is not something I'll make the mistake of doing ever again, but I see no bruises from where I'm standing. It doesn't mean he didn't hurt her in other ways.

There's a very good chance that the man is willing to do whatever it takes to get paid, and this entire situation is just proof of how far he'll go. Nash said he was instructed to keep her safe. Somehow, his definition of safe is her, along with three men, being tied to chairs in some abandoned house.

Tears start to leak down my sister's face, and I understand them immediately. Reality is starting to settle into her. As much as I wanted to protect her from every aspect of this, I know that in doing it, I'll only make her less safe. Protecting someone from the evils in the world could leave them vulnerable. If Alani knew what had happened, maybe she wouldn't be in this situation at all.

I watch her watch Donovan until he walks out of the house.

Members of Cerberus work to untie the men and Alani. The two men with wedding rings hug, whispering softly to each other. One of the Cerberus men walks up to them, his eyes scanning each of them for injuries. One looks angrier than the other, and the Cerberus member has to press his palm into his chest to keep him from leaving the house. I imagine this is the one that vowed to hurt Donovan.

The third man goes right to Alani, wrapping his arms around her. I'd suspect that he's her boyfriend with the

affection he's showing her, but her arms are loose at her side, her eyes glued to the door Donovan left through.

Slick approaches my sister, who looks relieved when the guy hugging her takes a step back.

Even with Nash right beside me, I feel alone, left out, as if I'm watching this whole scene play out in a movie rather than experiencing it myself.

I feel her eyes on me. As much as I was looking forward to seeing her again, I hadn't considered it would be under these circumstances or that she'd even have a clue about what happened while I was gone. I prayed that if we were able to see each other again, she wouldn't have a clue, and if I ignored it long enough, the pain from it would fade away.

Alani breaks away from Slick, walking toward me, but there isn't relief in her eyes.

"I guess I have you to blame for all of this?" she snaps. "This has something to do with all the twisted shit you've been involved in?"

My throat seizes, and I have to wonder just how fast she was able to reject any benefit of the doubt after getting that tape.

I want to explain it all to her. I want her to understand that everything I've done has been to protect her, but I can't. Despite these people knowing what happened, I still don't feel comfortable just vomiting all my trauma for them to hear.

"Your sister was abducted from the parking lot outside of your dorm building," Nash growls, coming to my defense.

I grab his arm, a nonverbal insistence that he shut up, but the man's intention can't be stopped.

"She was abused, tortured, fucking raped a countless number of times, to fucking protect you," he growls.

Alani darts her eyes from his to mine, her chin trembling with each one of his words.

She shakes her head as if she can't fathom that he's telling the truth. When she looks at me and I don't deny it, she

knows it to be true.

“Ayla?” she asks, stepping forward.

“Donavan may have gone about it the wrong way, but he was here to keep you safe. The video you were sent was a threat.”

Alani looks sick to her stomach. “They made you do those things?”

I nod, unable to find words right now.

“You’ll tell me everything?” she begs.

I nod again, grateful she’ll give me the chance to speak.

Slick steps forward, a compassionate look on her face, and I hate the way Nash takes a step back. I want him beside me, but I have no right to ask that of him. He’s already done so much.

“We have a room set up for you two to stay in tonight,” Slick offers.

I look to Nash, wondering if he has a counteroffer. I’m still not exactly impressed with the way Cerberus handled the situation in Mexico, even though I know they did what they had to with the information they were presented with at the time.

Nash doesn’t offer a solution or an alternative plan. He answers me by turning around and walking out of the room.

“That would be great,” I tell Slick, barely getting the words out before Alani is wrapping her arms around me tighter and sobbing on my shoulder.

Nash is nowhere to be seen when we leave the house. The place he parked his truck is empty as we ride away in the back of a Cerberus SUV.

Our first stop is Alani’s dorm room so she can get some clothes. Slick escorts her inside while I wait. Next, we’re taken to a hotel out on the highway that runs through the small, sleepy town.

We're each handed a plastic key card outside of the elevator on the third floor, Slick assuring us that we're safe, and someone will be posted outside of the door.

"You're free to go," she says, locking eyes with me. "But I'd advise you to let Legacy escort you if you plan to leave."

Even with the hulk of a man right outside of the door, I feel less safe when we closed ourselves into the hotel room than I did last night with Nash, as he held me in that tiny little house in that horrible neighborhood.

I wish he were here, if anything as a distraction, a way to keep from having this conversation with my little sister. She's going to want details, and I know speaking of them aloud for the very first time may have the power to destroy me.

Chapter 34

Nash

I could see the indecision in her eyes as she was offered a safe place to stay. I could see she needed me to make that decision for her. Everything she has done has been for her sister. If I thought she was in the right headspace to finally start making decisions based on her needs rather than the needs of others, I might have done something other than walk out of the house and leave her with those commandos.

Part of my walking out is because she's become too damn important to me. When I looked at her and the first thing I felt was *choose me*, I knew I had to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Feeling like I'm owed something, or I deserve a part of her, is dangerous. It's fucking selfish and so far out of my comfort zone, that I've spent hours trying to let go of any thoughts of her.

I'm finding it impossible, but that may be because I followed Cerberus to this fucking hotel. They're watching me watch the front door, as if I pose some sort of fucking threat to the two women inside.

I couldn't leave her. My heart pounded, fear threatening to take over with each rotation of my tires, when I tried to drive away last night. I may not want her inside of me, but that doesn't clean my system of her. There's no such thing as a fucking clean break where this woman is concerned. It should terrify me, and I'm sure at some point, it might, but today is not the day.

I tell myself I just need to make sure that she's going to be okay, that Alani isn't going to blame her or hate her for what's been out of Ayla's control. I tell myself that I've put in too much time to walk away right before the problems are solved.

It doesn't make sense. This isn't a job. I'm not getting paid to protect that woman, but mentally treating it like any

other mission right now calms that part inside of me that's growing increasingly anxious at not seeing her leave the hotel as the sun starts to rise.

I know she's safe, but there's more than just the threat of Cortez to protect her from. Her sister spit vile things at her. I understand how adrenaline works. Some people are wired to lash out when they're scared rather than cry. It's possible that Alani is the type to manage things that way, but I couldn't help trying to protect Ayla from incurring her sister's anger. The woman has been through enough. It wasn't my place to step in, but I don't think there's a force that exists on the earth that could've stopped it.

I'm not exactly happy watching one of the Cerberus assholes saunter up to my fucking truck, but at least he looks just as equally annoyed to be doing it.

I roll down my window as he steps up to it, keeping my eyes on the front of the hotel.

"Do you have a fucking plan?"

"Do I need a fucking plan?" I ask, turning my gaze at him for a second.

BISHOP is sewn onto a patch on the upper left part of his leather vest.

"I figured you and your buddy over there had something in the works."

"Buddy?"

I follow the point of his finger, shaking my head when I see Donovan's sneering face glaring at the front door of the hotel.

"He's not my buddy."

"You two just happen to work for the same guy," Bishop says in a way that tells me he'd never believe a word I ever said, so I don't bother explaining that we're more like fucking subcontractors. Angel isn't our fucking boss.

"Is it too much to ask that you guys just fucking leave?"

I scoff at his question.

“I know what it’s like,” he says, his eyes staring up at the third floor, as if he’s watching for someone in particular.

I remain silent. I’m not this guy’s fucking friend.

“Spending time with someone in a shitty situation can make a man think all sorts of crazy shit. I did it once. Spent half a day in the sandpits, thinking I was going to die.”

I sigh in irritation but it doesn’t stop this man from talking.

“Thought I was so fucking in love with the woman I experienced that with. Got one night with her. Best night of my fucking life.”

“And let me guess. She played the ‘friends’ card the next day and even though you’ve been shut down, you still can’t help but hope that she’s going to end up yours one day?”

I roll my head on the seat and look over at him, wanting to chuckle at the way his jaw works, telling me I got it right.

“She’s got a man,” he says. “Fucking laugh it up now. My point—”

“Don’t give a fuck about your point,” I say, not bothering to offer a goodbye before hitting the button in the door to roll up the window.

I wait until the biker gets back to his post right inside the hotel door before stepping out of my truck and making my way in Donovan’s direction.

I saw something I was hoping I’d misread in his eyes last night when he was looking at Alani, but apparently, my sixth sense was working just fine. Whatever it means needs to be shut down really fucking quick.

Donavan gives me a look that tells me he isn’t exactly up for visitors right now, and I know I won’t get shit out of him. Approaching him is exactly like that Bishop fucker approaching me. It made no difference the effort he put in, trying to explain why it’s better to just leave Ayla alone. I’ll only be wasting my breath on Donovan.

I change course, heading into the lobby of the hotel.

I feel Bishop's eyes on my back as I step up to the coffee urns like I own the place. Let one of these motherfuckers tell me to get lost.

In fact, I pray they do. I have some seriously pent-up anger I'd like to take out on one of their faces.

Just to spite all the leather-wearing assholes floating in and out of the lobby, I fill my coffee cup and take a seat on one of the couches. I hate the way Bishop grins when I can't manage to keep the wince of pain off my face completely as I settle in.

For all my bravado, I know it's very unlikely I'd win in a fight against any of these massive fuckers.

I sip my coffee, my eyes on the elevator, wondering if they're going to sneak her out through one of the fire exits rather than having her walk right past me.

Chapter 35

Ayla

My throat burns from talking and crying last night. I hardly slept. Although I didn't bother Alani in the other room, when I see her this morning, I don't think she got much sleep either.

Her eyes are as red and puffy as mine were when I looked in the mirror.

She confessed to feeling extremely guilty for talking to me the way she did, for not letting me explain, and for being so quick to judge.

For the first time in my life, I didn't tell her it was okay. I didn't coddle her and lie that everyone would've acted the way she did. I love my sister, and I think I've proven that by the things I've done to protect her. I also deserve better than what I got from her. With our parents' deaths, we were put in an unimaginable position. Not to sound like I have an overinflated ego, but I feel like I've done a pretty damn decent job in taking care of her to this point, most current situation notwithstanding.

She hands me a cup of coffee with a weak smile.

"I went down and got these from the lobby. Breakfast is already over."

"Couldn't eat right now if I wanted to," I tell her, my inability to eat much a side effect of the amount we were given at the compound.

She watches me drink, chewing her lip the entire time.

"You made me swear last night that I'd tell you the truth. I think as a courtesy, you should do the same." I set the cup of coffee down on the small kitchenette counter. "You look like you have something to say."

"Are you going to hate me?"

I tilt my head, but I don't answer immediately.

“Are you going to blame me for what happened to you?”

Tears I thought were long dried up burn the backs of my eyes once again.

I can't count how many times I wished I didn't have a sister at all. It's not that I wanted her gone. I just wished they didn't have anyone to hold over my head. There were so many times that I wanted to give up but couldn't because of what it would mean for Alani. I hated that I had to be strong for someone else, when there were days I would've rather been dead. I also never imagined I'd be free of Cortez, and despite the threat he still poses, we're both safe right now. Our current reality always seemed like a fantasy, something I could dream about for decades that would never come to pass.

“I don't hate you,” I tell her without going into detail.

Neither one of us can help nor change the roles we were given.

“What happens now?”

I shake my head. “I don't know. I lost everything, my job, the apartment, all my belongings.”

“Any idea how much money you have in the bank?”

I shake my head. “One of the Cerberus people said that Cortez was depositing money into my account, but I don't feel right taking it.”

“You're joking right? Don't you feel like you're owed something?”

I have to look away from her, hoping she never feels the way I do. How can I tell her that accepting his money also feels like I'm accepting that I'm okay with what I did? That it makes me feel like almost anyone who hates their job does when they cash their checks.

But I also know that it would be ignorant, and nothing more than stupid pride, to just walk away from it. I have literally nothing and turning down money would be dumb.

“I don't have ID,” I remind her.

Alani walks across the room, unzipping her purse. “I have ID and a bank card. You said to only use it for emergencies, and I’d consider this an emergency.”

I feel like the weight of the world has been lifted from my shoulders. I completely forgot that I added her to the account after we closed our parents’ after their deaths.

“There’s a branch only a few miles down the highway,” she says.

She walks back to me and hands over the debit card. It feels like a peace offering, and it makes me wonder if she’s mad at me for doing what I did to protect her. I’d no more blame her for what happened than I blame Nash for his part in it. She hasn’t just come right out and reminded me that she never asked me to do all of it for her, but I’m pretty certain I’ve seen it in her eyes more than once.

“I understand too, if you need to pull money from my tuition fund to get back on your feet.”

I stand in front of my little sister, feeling very similar to the way I felt when she asked if she was going to be taken from me when our parents died.

I clasp both sides of her face, forcing her to look at me.

“I’ll make it work, Alani. You’re not getting out of college that easily.”

She gives me a weak smile that doesn’t reach her eyes, taking a step back and making it clear she doesn’t want to be touched.

I know deep inside that our relationship will never be the same. She was never thrilled when I gave her directions as a teen, and that didn’t suddenly change when our parents died and I became responsible for her.

This will be no different. Only our relationship is now tainted with what she saw on that tape and the details she insisted I give her last night while explaining what happened.

“I’m going to get changed and then we can head to the bank,” she says, making a hasty exit from the living area of the

suite Cerberus provided us.

It takes thirty minutes before I see her again, and she looks no more accepting of the information she now has than she did before. I want to ask her about Donovan, but she's turned every question back on me.

I don't know how many times I've heard *we're not talking about me right now*.

Legacy steps to the side when I pull open the door.

"Could we get a ride to the bank?"

He nods and tells me that he'll let one of the guys in the lobby know we're coming.

I feel helpless once again. The fact that I have nothing hits me hard in the elevator ride down. No car, no apartment, no fucking hope.

One of the other guys, wearing that same leather vest, walks toward us, but my attention is on the man trying to stand from the small sofa in the lobby.

Nash.

He gives me a little wave as if he's feeling awkward and is unsure about how I'll feel that he's there.

"Ayla," my sister hisses when I start to walk in his direction.

I told her everything because she demanded that of me. I didn't skip the parts about what Nash was forced to do or what I was forced to do with him. She told me last night that she felt like it wasn't right for me to be getting help from him, but she has no idea what we went through. She knows the details. She heard it all from me, but experiencing it firsthand is completely different from just hearing about it.

The air thickens the distance between us. The Cerberus member who was walking in our direction looks back at Nash and stops in his tracks. It's as if he knows he's going to waste his time if he approaches me.

How many times will I let him slip away? How many times in my life will I feel the same sort of unexplainable connection that I feel with him? The thought of watching him walk away even once more makes my heart seize in my chest.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” he says as he stops a foot in front of me.

He doesn't make excuses for being here. He doesn't lie and say it's a coincidence that we're both here. He knew this is where I ended up last night. He's here for me and me alone.

“Alani is on my bank account, so we're going to go get some money.”

“It's good that you have her,” he says, reminding me that not all is lost. My reason for fighting as hard as I have is safe, and none of the material shit matters.

“Can you give us a ride?”

He takes a step to the side, the move letting me know that he has no problem getting us to the bank.

Alani silently follows us out of the hotel, and I'm grateful that she doesn't voice her opinion for the very first time in her life. She's normally a very vocal person.

It doesn't keep her from huffing in irritation, but I'll take the win where I can get it.

“Weren't we going to ride with one of those leather-wearing guys?” Alani asks, as the front doors slide open so we can leave the hotel.

“They're going to stop showing up for you if you keep leaving them high and dry,” Nash says, but his tone is more joking than anything.

I'm not under the illusion that Cerberus was there for either me or Alani last night. It just so happens that Donovan's crazy ass abducted people close to them. It was happenstance more than anything.

“That motherfucker,” my sister spits, her path changing as she spots someone across the parking lot.

“What the hell? Alani, where are you going?” I yell at her back.

“Donavan is over there,” Nash explains, but he clasps my arm, keeping me from moving when Alani goes to the passenger side of his truck. She pulls open the door and climbs inside like the psychopath didn’t abduct her the night before and tie her to a damn chair.

I can’t hear what’s being said between the two of them but Alani is screaming at the man, her hands animated as she yells. Donavan turns his head, only a few words on his lips.

Alani reaches across the cab of the truck and slaps him right across the face, hard enough to turn his head.

Terror fills my blood as I watch. Donavan tightens his jaw muscles and looks straight ahead. He doesn’t hit her back or grip a handful of her hair.

I stand there waiting for Alani to get out of his truck, but she stubbornly crosses her arms over her chest.

“She’s fine,” Nash assures me, holding my hand and guiding me to his truck on the other side of the parking lot.

I’m questioning whether she is or not, but when Donavan pulls out of the parking lot, he drives it straight to the bank.

Chapter 36

Nash

It's very clear that Ayla isn't happy about whatever it is that we just witnessed between Alani and Donovan. She doesn't say a word as we follow his truck to the bank.

The second we arrive, Alani is bolting from the man's truck, and Ayla is climbing out of mine.

Parked across from each other, I watch Donovan lock his eyes on Alani, his jaw clenched angrily as his gaze follows her into the bank.

He keeps his eyes locked there, despite knowing I'm parked right across from him.

I argue with myself, knowing this is really none of my business, but at the same time, anything that has the power to hurt Ayla pisses me off. It's very clear there's more than just a goddamned quick abduction in play here.

I climb out of my truck, knowing full well that Donovan is a wild card. He could just as easily shoot me in this parking lot as he could drive off before I get to the driver's side window.

He doesn't drive off as I approach, and that leaves me wary of the first option.

He narrows his eyes at me when I block his view.

"Got a fucking problem?" he growls, after rolling his window down.

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

He pulls his gaze from mine.

"Explain to me how a girl who you abducted feels comfortable enough to not only climb in your truck but slap you in the face without fear."

"I don't fucking hurt women," he says, his voice low and filled with warning.

“You abducted her,” I argue.

“I tried other ways to keep an eye on her. It didn’t work.”

“You fucked her,” I surmise.

There’s a long beat of silence, but I don’t need a response from him to know it’s the truth.

“You took advantage, asshole. She’s like fucking eighteen. She—”

“She wasn’t a fucking virgin if that’s what you’re accusing me of,” he snaps, the bitterness in his tone making me think he’s upset that she wasn’t. “I didn’t drug her. I didn’t abuse her. In fact, I couldn’t keep her off my dick.”

“That’s enough,” I hiss, feeling dirty with the conversation even though they’re both adults. “Ayla’s going to be pissed that you’re doing the whole barely legal thing with her little sister.”

“I don’t fucking answer to Ayla, now do I?”

The tone he takes when saying her name makes me want to climb through the fucking window and rip his head off.

“Watch it,” I warn, despite knowing I have less of a chance of winning against this rabid motherfucker than I had if I chose to fight one of those leather-wearing pricks.

Thankfully, the man isn’t going to force me to find out because he snaps his jaw closed, his eyes locked across the parking lot.

I reposition, watching both Ayla and Alani walk out of the front of the bank. Ayla has an envelope in her hand, and I’m glad she has something. I imagine she was feeling anchorless with nothing to call her own. The money doesn’t solve anything, but I know it will help her on some level.

Alani doesn’t bother to look in this direction as she climbs into the back seat of my truck.

I head back in that direction, not bothering to say another word to Donovan. If we're all lucky, this will be the last time we see his ass. Angel really needs to research who he's working with, because the way he chose to handle this situation is beyond fucked up.

I try to meet Alani's eyes as I climb inside, but she's too busy looking down at her cell phone.

"Did that work out for you?" I ask Ayla, as I pull my seatbelt across my chest and click it into place.

"Yes," she answers.

I feel awkward just sitting inside the truck, but I have no idea where she wants to go.

"Need to go back to the hotel?" I ask after no one offers any suggestions.

"Take me to my dorm," Alani says.

"Please," Ayla adds with a soft smile.

I back out of the parking lot, locking eyes with Donovan one last time, and I see the truth there. Whatever occurred between him and Alani isn't over, and anyone would be a fool to get in the way of that.

"I'm going to have to go back to Plano. The hospital I worked at will have copies of everything I need. I'm going to use Alani's computer to order a birth certificate," Ayla says, as if she's walking through her next steps to herself rather than informing me about her plans.

"The one to the right," Alani says when we draw closer to the college.

I turn in the direction she points, knowing neither of these women are ready to be on their own in the world. Neither have said anything or mentioned noticing Donovan's fucking dark truck following us from the bank. He could be anyone. He could be someone wanting to hurt them. As diligent as Ayla thinks she is, she's fucking not.

Alani finally notices him when he parks in a restricted spot closest to the walkway she'll have to pass to get into her

dorm. She scoffs, but there's a hint of something else on her face as she looks in my direction.

"Thanks for the ride," she mutters, and I get the feeling that she's doing it at Ayla's insistence, not because she's actually grateful.

If Ayla told her sister everything, then the woman has every right to hate me.

We both watch as Alani crosses the parking lot, Donavan already out of his truck and standing at the hood. With her nose slightly tilted to the sky, the girl walks right past him, not bothering to acknowledge his existence. Donavan looks livid at being ignored, but he doesn't reach for her. Hell, the man doesn't even call after her as she walks away. He simply climbs back into his truck, his eyes locked on the door she disappeared through.

"They slept together, didn't they?"

"Yeah," I answer.

"She's always been a little wild," Ayla mutters. "It scares me now more than ever."

Ayla turns to face me. I don't know what the tears balancing on her lower lashes mean, but I sure as fuck know what I want them to.

"Thank you," she says.

"It was just a ride to the bank."

My fingers twitch with the need to wipe the tear away as the first one rolls down her cheek.

"It was more than a ride to the bank."

I nod, understanding what she means.

It would be in both of our best interest to let her go, to keep my fucking mouth shut and let her climb out of this truck. Doing so should be easy. I've never had a problem walking away.

The thought of doing it now brings physical pain, an ache in my chest and the twist of my stomach.

“Let me take you to Plano,” I offer, knowing how fucking ridiculous the offer is. Plano is four hours in the opposite direction of where I should be heading, which is home, so I can fully recover from the fucking torture Pirro was so happy to dish out.

She watches my face, her eyes traveling a slow trail over every feature. It feels like a caress, like she’s going to say no, and she’s trying to commit everything about me to memory.

“I have to go to Plano, but then I have to come back here to get my birth certificate. I’ll have to use Alani’s address because I don’t have one.”

“I can bring you back.”

She takes a deep breath. I know she’s gearing up to tell me to fuck off, so I have no idea why I say what I do next.

“Use my address. I can take you to Plano, and then you can come back to my place. I can even set you up in Plano if that’s what you want.”

“A ride would be great,” she says, and I don’t miss the fact that she doesn’t agree to anything else.

She knows she needs a ride. She knows it would be dangerous for her on a bus. She’s not foolish enough to turn it down, but having anything to do with me after? Not going to happen.

“Do you want me to come back? Like tomorrow or—”

“I want to go today,” she interrupts, her cheeks pinking. “I mean, if that’s okay? I just want to start getting my life back together. I feel like I’m having to start from scratch.”

“Okay,” I say, even though I feel like she’s cutting me off at the knees.

I made my offer, and she wasn’t interested. I’m not like Donavan. I’m not going to take her prisoner because it would be easier than letting her make her own decisions.

“I won’t be long,” she says as she climbs out of the truck.

Donavan doesn't speak to her through his open truck window when she walks past, and I think back to how he's handled this situation. Maybe telling her what she's going to do rather than allowing her to choose is the best way to go.

But she spent months being told what to do. She might listen if I attempted it because she once again feels like she has limited options, but she'd hate me more than she probably does right now.

The best thing for both of us would be for me to drive away and leave her to make her own choices, ones that don't include me, but I just can't manage it.

I know where this will leave me, but I'd rather have just a little more time with her before she discards me. I'll take what I can get from her even though I know I don't deserve it.

Chapter 37

Ayla

“I love you, Alani, but—”

“Everything before the word but is bullshit,” she says, her eyes locked on me, filled with judgment.

“I need a ride home.”

“And I told you I could find you a ride with someone else. That man hurt you. I don’t understand why—”

“We hurt each other,” I remind her. “And I trust him.”

“How?” she asks, genuinely confused.

“He protected me. Everything he did was to protect me.” I clear my throat, refusing to dive back into the conversations we had last night.

“He’s a psychopath, Ayla.”

My spine stiffens. Before, when I was normal, I would’ve let her say what she wanted and just move on from it, but the criticism in her tone fires me up.

“You slept with that lunatic in the parking lot,” I remind her. “He abducted you along with three others.”

“He took me and the guys didn’t like it. They practically volunteered to come along.”

“Everyone was tied to a fucking chair, Alani. Do you—”

I snap my jaw closed when she jerks her head back.

“Colorful language,” she mutters.

“Nothing you haven’t heard before,” I remind her.

“Never from you,” she says as she crosses her arms and glares at me.

“What happened with that man?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t ever ask me about him. Why are you so quick to spit curse words?”

My cheek twitches in irritation. I love my sister. I think I've proven that time and time again, but she just doesn't get it. I told her in greater detail than I ever thought I would about what happened to me.

"I'm different," I tell her, pressing the final key on the keyboard and getting the confirmation number for ordering my birth certificate.

"Do you think it's trauma making you want to spend time with the man who hurt you?"

"Helped me," I correct, as I stand and start walking toward the door.

I feel out of place here, in this pristine dorm room. It's very girly and frankly, a little too young adult. After what I've been through, I feel like I need something less fresh, something tainted with time and use.

"You're leaving already?"

"He's waiting," I remind her. "I'll be back."

"For your birth certificate," she says with a deep frown.

"I can't stay in your dorm room."

"Where will you stay when you get back?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I'll figure it out."

Alani walks with me out of her room. The compression I felt in my chest starts to lift the closer I make it to the front door. By the time I'm in the sun, I'm feeling what I consider my new normal.

Donavan is still in his truck, but Alani doesn't acknowledge him as she turns to face me.

"Let me know you made it safely," she says, her throat clogged with emotion.

The girl goes from one end of the spectrum to the other so quickly, it gives me whiplash.

"I will."

"No more lies."

“I’ll do anything to protect you,” I vow, unable to make the promise she wants because certain circumstances require certain action. “Please be vigilant. Don’t go anywhere alone. Don’t go out at night.”

She nods, taking me seriously instead of saying *yes, mother* like she normally would.

“I still think it would be best if you came with us,” I say, diving back into the conversation we had earlier in her dorm room.

“I can’t. The semester starts tomorrow. Tuition and fees have already been paid, and not wasting any money is more important now than ever before.”

“I can get more money. It’s not safe. The threat—”

“I’ll be fine. I’m an adult, Ayla. Let me make my own decisions.”

She has a point, so all I can do is nod and open my arms for a hug.

We embrace, and for the first time that I can recall, I’m the first to pull away.

“I love you,” she whispers.

I cup her face, using my thumb to swipe away a tear. “I love you, too.”

I don’t look back as I walk toward Nash’s truck because I might never leave if I did. I glare at Donovan, hoping he catches the threat in my eyes. He must because his lips form a flat line as he gives me the slightest dip of his head.

He doesn’t look like he plans to go anywhere, and I don’t know if it’s because he’s staying because Angel has asked him to, or if he’s formed some sort of obsession with my sister. He didn’t yell back at her despite her screaming in his face. He didn’t strike her or retaliate in any way when she hit him. There’s a voice inside of me saying that he’d never hurt her, despite him tying her to a chair, which I think he did for her own good. I do feel like I’m leaving her with a hungry

wolf, but with the way he's watching her, I get the impression he might be good for her on some level.

My eyes rove over the parking lot, and I feel a little more relief when I see the dark SUV parked a few spots over. The Cerberus member lifts two fingers from the steering wheel in a tiny wave, nodding his head as if to tell me that she'll be fine. I nod back, wondering why they're still here in the first place, but not at all upset that they are.

My steps stumble a little as I consider that getting help from Cerberus would probably be better than riding to Plano with Nash, but I don't feel the sympathy I sense from Cerberus when I'm with him. I don't think he's judging every choice I make and struggling against voicing his own opinion.

I don't think Cerberus is bad. I think they serve a very good purpose, and they saved me from Angel's wrath. They were able to rescue the other woman abducted from this campus the very same night I was. Slick's explanation made it clear that the girl, who brought me food that one time wearing the Lindell Lemur shirt was actually from Lindell. Cerberus was hired by her parents to track her down and bring her home.

The unease inside of me doesn't settle or dissipate as I get closer to Nash's truck.

Instead of going to the passenger side and climbing in, I step up to the driver's side window.

"Hey," he says, the word affecting me in a way it probably shouldn't.

"Why are you helping me?"

His head tilts a little. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to be your obligation. I don't want your help if it's because all you're doing is making amends for what you were forced to do. I don't need an apology. I don't want you to—"

I snap my mouth closed, taking a step back when he opens the door and climbs out.

“Obligation?” he asks, his voice a controlled growl, low yet not menacing.

I turn to walk away. I can't argue with this man in the parking lot of my sister's school. I'm feeling too raw. It's all too fucking much for me. Leaving Alani, being uncertain that if she's safe, needing to restart my entire life... it's just too much.

Nash grabs my arms, the back of my hand brushing against the front of his jeans.

I snap my eyes to his.

“That's why,” he says, his face inching closer to mine. “I can't explain this fucking attraction to you. This need that boils inside of me that's telling me to get as close as I can to you. I don't know why I breathe easier when you're near or why the voices calm when I have eyes on you. Tell me it's fucking different for you, and I'll walk away. I'll deal, but you have to be the one to stop first.”

I swallow as I look into his eyes.

“It doesn't make sense,” I whisper.

“I don't think it's supposed to.”

I pull my eyes, movement to the side drawing my attention. Legacy, the same guy who was standing outside the hotel room, keeping us safe last night, has climbed out of the SUV and is approaching us. Nash notices but doesn't release his hold on my arm. I pull slightly, resting my hand inside his as the commando comes to make sure I'm okay.

It makes it clear that there are people in my corner. Knowing that brings on another wave of emotion because I've felt like I've lost literally everything. I was alone for so long, even when caring for Alani. I never knew I needed anyone else.

Legacy doesn't give a shit about the hand holding. He pushes at Nash's chest the second he's within reach.

“Grab her again,” the biker snarls. “It'll be the last fucking thing you do.”

I look to the left, noticing Donovan climbing out of his truck, his snarling glare focused on us.

Nash doesn't engage with Legacy. His eyes are locked on mine.

"Make up your fucking mind," he snaps. Although I didn't know him before Pirro hurt him, I don't think he would've acted this way beforehand.

It's proof that he's different, and I know I'm different too. I don't need to be coddled. I don't need to be given time or space to figure shit out.

Having some long drawn-out argument about what I should or shouldn't do in my head is a waste of time. It feels right with him. He feels right, and honestly, I don't care if it's the wrong choice. I only care that it's my choice.

I step around Legacy, keeping my distance and making sure I don't touch the man, as I approach Nash. His eyes are locked on mine.

I look up at him, standing only a few inches from him. If the wind blew, our clothes would probably touch on the breeze.

I don't say a word. I've made my decision, and now the ball is back in his court. He could easily decide I'm not worth the trouble I'm already bringing him.

He looks down, his eyes darting between mine, as if he's trying to figure out why him, or maybe he's wondering if I'm serious.

I see the second he figures it out.

A low rumble escapes his throat as he reaches out and clamps my jaw between his thumb and middle finger, the grip almost painful and completely perfect. He doesn't hesitate, doesn't pause to check with me one last time, before pressing his lips to mine.

It's our new beginning, and it's absolutely perfect.

Chapter 38

Nash

I just know I'm going to get my ass kicked by either Donovan or Cerberus, but then I feel her arms go around my fucking neck, and the problem I was having in my jeans, just from watching her walk in my direction, increases.

It's instinct to lift her off her feet, and I'm wondering if it's just as natural for her when she wraps her legs around my waist.

Jesus fuck. I swear to God I'm not going to be able to stop myself.

There's a whole fucking list of people watching—Cerberus, Donovan, and whatever college students just happen to be walking by. These barely of-age adults are about to get a fucking lesson because everything that's happened to us has been building up to this. I'm not one to believe in fate. I think our lives, including our futures, are by choice not design. That was until Ayla.

With her lips pressed to mine, her warm tongue stroking inside my mouth, it feels like it was meant to be. Everything we went through is because we were supposed to be right here. The pain, the fear, the heartache... all of it led us to each other.

I kiss her harder, turning us as I pin her to the side of my truck. I can't resist rolling my hips against her, showing her how much I'm enjoying this. I squeeze her harder when she groans into my mouth, her own need evident in the sound.

I swallow as she pulls away, her eyes filled with tears. Before Mexico, I would make a joke right now. I'd try to get people to laugh while I got my emotions under control, but this woman fucking changes everything.

"Need you," I whisper as if we don't have an audience standing around and judging us.

She bites her lip. "I can feel that you do."

I shake my head. "Not just that, Ayla. I need you."

A tangle of sadness and relief fills her eyes. “I need you too.”

A throat clears behind us before I can seal that confession with a kiss, making her eyes dart over my shoulder.

I bite my lip to keep from saying what I really want to say when the apples of her cheeks start to turn red. She’s embarrassed, having gotten completely lost in our kiss, and I fucking love the sight of it.

She untangles her legs from around my waist, but I don’t give her any room, a heady moan erupting from my throat when she slides down the front of me.

“College students are recording us on their phones,” she whispers before burying her face in my chest.

I look over my shoulder, past the Cerberus guy who just shakes his head and walks back to his SUV. Sure enough, there are several people standing on the sidewalk with their phones pointed in our direction. What does it say about this newest generation that they don’t even stop once I make it clear I know what they’re doing?

“Let’s go,” I say, nodding at Donovan.

I have no doubt he was going to jump in to help me, but I also see the relief on his face that he didn’t have to. He was already pissed that he ended up in a situation that tangled with Cerberus.

Instead of going around to the passenger side, Ayla climbs into the truck on my side, her perfect ass damn near in my face before she settles on the other side of the truck.

“Nope,” I say when I climb in and flip up the middle console.

I pat the bench seat beside me, waiting for her to settle there and buckle her seatbelt.

“Still want to head toward Plano?”

“Might as well,” she says, making my chest cave just a little.

Doubt begins to settle back inside of me. It was a kiss. It may be attraction. It may be addiction borne of the trauma we've both suffered.

She said she needs me too. She knows I wasn't talking about just sex.

"Stop," she whispers, pressing her palm to my thigh. "I can practically smell your brain working."

My erection won't go away. Even forty-five minutes later when we merge onto Interstate 35, it's a steel pipe in my pants. I think she's purposely torturing me because she'll brush the side of it every couple of minutes, as if checking to see if it's still there, but she doesn't make any further demands.

I don't think she's unaffected with the way she keeps redistributing her weight on the seat, as if she's uncomfortable, but she hasn't made much of an advance either.

The torture continues in silence all the way down the fucking interstate. By the time we make it right to the southern part of Waco, I'm done with the wait.

She doesn't say a word when I take an exit, but a quick glance at the soft smile she's trying to hide by looking out the passenger window is the only thing I need to tell me that I'm making the right choice.

The shoulder of the road is the best I can do. Waiting a second longer to feel her body against mine just isn't possible.

There's an urgency in my blood. It's simmering, threatening to boil over. If I ever doubted she felt the same way, I don't any longer as she unclips her seatbelt the second I place the truck in park.

We reach for each other at the same time, her leg lifting to straddle me right here in the damn truck.

"Fuck," I groan when she rolls her hips.

I reach up, pulling her hair and forcing her head back so I can suck at the sensitive skin on her neck, feeling more than a little pleased with the mark I leave behind.

I have to take controlled breaths when she reaches between us, her fingers struggling to unzip my jeans.

We both jerk at the tap on the window.

I feel like a fool. I've vowed to protect this woman, and I've let my fucking dick put her in danger. I don't reach for the gun under the seat because I'd have every cop in the state of Texas after my ass if I hurt the state trooper standing outside the window.

"Shit," Ayla grumbles as she climbs off my lap.

I hate that she moves all the way to the passenger seat.

I roll down the window, putting that good 'ol boy look I perfected long ago on my face.

The guy looks from me to my girl before settling his eyes back on me.

There's a soft smile on his face as if he understands my inability to control myself.

"This isn't the place for that," he says, his voice sterner than the look in his eyes.

"No, sir. It isn't," I agree.

"License and insurance?"

"Of course," I say, reaching across the truck to pull the documentation from the glove box.

The insurance is fake, but unless I'm in an accident, the cop would never know. The ID is fake also, but unless he digs really deep, he'll never know that I'm not actually Nash Cutler. I've spent the last decade building that name, and I'm pretty positive it'll pass as real.

I hand the two pieces of documentation over to him, looking back at Ayla.

Her eyes are glued out of the front windshield, but she doesn't seem scared.

"I'm going to—"

A group of loud cars roar past on the interstate, grabbing the trooper's attention.

"There are several choices of hotels to choose from two exits up," he says as he shoves the driver's license and insurance card back at me. "Be safe."

"You too," I say, but he's already rushing back to his car.

I roll my window up, waiting for him to pull out from behind us before I look back over at Ayla.

Her eyes are on mine this time, and I can tell she's biting the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling.

"That's so embarrassing," she says, her voice barely a whisper.

I nod in agreement, but I don't say anything else as I pull off the shoulder. I stay on the frontage road, getting no argument from her as I pull into the closest hotel parking lot.

She climbs out when I do, following behind me as I enter the front of the building.

The clerk looks from me to her, and I see what he sees. But her mussed hair and the way her clothes aren't hanging just right has a different definition for me than it does for him.

"Miss, are you okay?" he asks. As fucking annoying as it is, good for him.

Ayla presses closer, and fuck if I don't love the way she runs her hand up my back as she speaks.

"We'd like a room, please. One bed."

The clerk doesn't seem impressed with either of us but he doesn't argue as he takes my fake ID and enters my information into the computer. Normally, I'd have a problem with it. I'd take the time to search out a place that takes cash and doesn't ask questions, but my patience is fucking over.

He hands us the keys, quickly going back to sit on the stool behind the desk and turns his attention back to the small television on the table.

The air between us feels alive as we climb into the elevator, and it only thickens as we approach and enter the room we've been assigned.

"I'm not a gentle lover," I confess once we're closed into the room, the scent of it welcoming, a far cry from the one we were in in Mexico.

"I don't need you to be gentle," she says without hesitation.

There's no regret in her tone. She doesn't look around the room as she closes the distance between us. She doesn't seem to regret her decision as she lifts onto her toes before pressing her mouth to mine.

Chapter 39

Ayla

“Wait,” he says before I can press my mouth to his again.

He clears his throat as if it pains him to press the brakes.

“Maybe we should talk first.”

“Talk? Like have the *I’ve had blank amount of partners* conversation?”

He shakes his head. “Maybe we should talk about expectations.”

“I expect to come,” I tell him.

He chuckles but doesn’t draw closer to me.

“I want to be brutally honest with you.”

I stiffen before dropping my arms at my sides.

This is the part where he tells me that he’s okay with sex, but he isn’t the type of man to get involved with anything serious.

“Honesty,” I say, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice. “That’s like a bucket of fucking cold water poured over my head.”

“I’m fucked in the head,” he says as I sit on the end of the bed.

“Aren’t we all?” I mutter.

“I enjoyed some of what I did to you back in Mexico.”

I meet his eyes. “I came, too.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not talking about pleasure that was forced from my body.”

I swallow, wondering how and when he had the ability to get inside my thoughts.

“I’ve fought myself about that very same thing,” I confess. “I’m not saying I wanted it, but I’m glad it was you. Does that even make sense?”

He swallows as he inches closer. “I don’t understand any of it.”

“I don’t either.”

“I can’t let go of this feeling that we’re—”

“Meant for each other,” I finish for him.

His nod, the acceptance of what it means, makes a rush of cold chills cover every inch of my body.

“I’m not a dreamer. I’ve never wasted time on thinking about my future,” he says. “If anyone asked me two months ago how I saw my story ending, I would’ve told them alone and probably too soon.”

I swallow, knowing what he means. I always thought of my life being different, but I had no plans to do anything to change the trajectory of it.

“How fucked up is it that I believe to my core that what happened to us was meant to happen to us?”

I stand as he inches closer. “I’d say then that maybe it was all worth it.”

“That’s fucking horrible,” he says.

“I know.”

We don’t say another word. He bends his head, his mouth finding mine, his tongue not wasting another second before swiping over mine.

I gasp when he grips a handful of my hair, jerking my head back.

The sizzle of electricity I’ve felt so many times with him near comes back full force. This situation between us isn’t perfect, fated or not. I know we’re going to argue. There will be times I’ll throw what we’ve done, how we’ve hurt each other, in his face. I won’t be able to stop myself. I’ll blame him as much as I blame myself. I know he’ll probably do the

same, but if we come back together like this, then I think we'll be okay.

And if we sizzle out, if the fire that burns between us is doused and nothing is left behind but smoke fading in the air, then I think I can be okay with that as well.

All I know, is right now, in this moment, Nash is who I need. He's who I want. He's who I choose.

For the longest time, I focused on what I didn't have. I fixated on what I lost, but I realize now that I was barely living. I was just going through the motions until I was forced to take a look at my life and what I valued.

"I'm going to fuck you now," he growls against my mouth. "Get naked, because if I try to undress you, I'll rip this shit from your body."

He takes a step back. As much as I want to tell him that's exactly what I want, I'm a reasonable person. I only have two sets of clothes after all.

I watch, my hands working to pull my shirt over my head, as he works open the zipper of his jeans.

My body is thrumming with need, an ache so deep inside of me that I know having him there is the only thing that will sate it, if only for a little while.

I don't concern myself with the psychology of why we're like this with each other. I don't care if it's because of the pain we've endured together and because of the other. I don't care if it doesn't make sense or if others would call it toxic.

I need him. He needs me.

It's as simple as it has to be.

Neither of us answer to anyone but ourselves, and that's what makes this perfect.

We have a million reasons to walk away from each other. It takes bravery to stay.

“Fuck,” he snaps, his hands working faster to pull off his shirt as he kicks his boots off one by one.

His erection juts toward me, as I shove the sweats down my hips.

“Taking too long,” he grunts as he steps forward and pushes me to my back on the bed, my shoes still on, and the sweats a tangle around my calves.

“Oh shit,” I hiss, as he lifts my legs, using the fabric between them to press my legs higher.

The first sweep of his tongue feels like I’ve been struck by lightning. As much as I want the next swipe, I don’t get it.

“Later,” he snaps, his lips glistening from my arousal.

It was a test. If he found me not ready, I have no doubt he’d spend some time getting me that way, but I’ve been slick, desperately needy for him, since we left Lindell.

He doesn’t ask permission, doesn’t check with me one last time, before he presses inside of me.

My mouth hangs open on a breathless scream at the intrusion.

It’s brutal and a little painful.

It’s fucking perfect.

He draws his hips back, his eyes locked on mine, his jaw tight, the muscles flexing as he clenches harder.

There’s no apology in his eyes. There’s no guilt.

This doesn’t resemble what happened before at all.

“Nash,” I hiss when he slams forward again, his grip on my sweats the only thing locking me in place.

“Don’t you dare ask me to stop,” he growls, his hips picking up the tempo.

“Never,” I say. “Harder.”

A menacing grin spreads across his face as he pulls back and slams forward again.

“I’m going to—what the fuck?” I hiss, when he pulls free of me, making me realize I was rocking against him because it leaves my hips fucking nothing but air.

“We have forever, baby,” he says, his big hands pulling at the shoe on my right foot.

He rips it free, tugging at the sweats until they fall from that leg.

I squeal when he flips me over, wondering how many bruises will be left behind when he grips my body, forcing my hips into the air.

“Nash,” I hiss again when he tugs my hair, forcing me to sit up on my knees, the back of my head planting against his shoulder.

“Keep your mouth shut unless you’re going to beg me for more,” he growls in my ear, his magical fucking cock finding that spot inside of me that aches for him and only him.

I whimper and his chest rumbles with something akin to pride at my desperation.

“Can’t stop it,” I warn, unsure of how my orgasm will make him respond.

“Don’t want you to. Fucking give it to me, Ayla. Let me know you’re mine.”

I don’t hesitate. I don’t try to stop it. I don’t feel an ounce of guilt or shame for the way my body explodes.

With the orgasm, I release all the negative shit Pirro and Cortez made me feel. With each pulse of my core, the humiliation, the degradation, the utter helplessness falls away.

“Goddamn, baby. That’s it. Look at me, Ayla.”

I lock eyes with him over my shoulder, my eyes shining with tears of relief.

“Not pulling out,” he warns.

“Please don’t,” I tell him.

“Fuck,” he hisses one more time before I feel the pulse of his cock.

His breaths are ragged, puffing from his lips as his hips continue to work.

It’s utter fucking perfection, and I don’t care how broken we are. We can be broken together, and that’s the beauty of us. We won’t ever need to look *Instagram* flawless. I won’t ever have to worry about the opinions of others. I can be raw and open, and he’s going to appreciate me more for it.

“Baby,” he whispers as he pulls free, turning me over to face him in the next breath.

His lips on mine feel like a promise. It’s a vow we’re both too vulnerable right now to speak out loud.

The kiss is slow, the nip of his teeth on my lower lip when he pulls away a quick reminder that he’s not going soft on me, physically or emotionally.

His wet cock runs along my slit as he lifts me, my legs immediately wrapping around his waist.

“You better not,” I warn when he walks with me in his arms to the bathroom. “I don’t have much to wear.”

He places me on the counter before pulling my shoe and sweats from my leg.

“Come on,” he says, holding out his hand to me so I can jump off the counter and join him.

We don’t talk. Our confessions are over. My mind isn’t filled with questions. I don’t spend the time in the shower, wondering what happens next. I don’t grow flustered, wondering about what his kisses mean.

All I concern myself with is the right now, with the way his hands skate down my back, not pausing to explore the scars left behind from the last four months.

I focus on his touch, his kiss, the way his hips roll against me when I curl my fingernails into his flesh. I listen to his moans when I bite at his skin, rather than wondering how

he manages to quiet the voice in my head that I've answered to my entire life.

There's nothing perfect about us, other than the fact that we're perfect for each other, scars, past traumas, and no plans for the future included.

Chapter 40

Nash

I don't know what I had in mind when I told Ayla she could use my address to mail her birth certificate. She didn't. She had it sent to her sister's address, but that didn't stop her from coming home with me after getting shit straight in Plano.

The way we came together in that hotel in Waco was only the beginning. I never imagined it would turn into four months of the kinkiest fucking sex of my life. I never knew I'd wake up beside her every fucking day, grateful that she didn't fade like a dream.

I also never anticipated I'd do nice shit like make her breakfast in bed before drilling her ass as she begs for more.

My cock thickens with the memories as I plate the last piece of French toast. We're both insatiable, and I know it can't last like this forever. I know, eventually, we'll have to face the real world for longer than one of her shifts at the pediatrician's office in town, but today isn't the day.

"Just what I wanted for breakfast," she says, her eyes locked on the erection protruding from my hips as I enter the room, rather than the plate in my hand.

"I think you have an addiction," I mutter, trying to act disinterested as I place the cup of juice and plate on the bedside table.

"I think you're right," she says.

"And to think you work with kids. What would your boss say?"

"Well, this morning he said *you're fired* when I called in, so I guess it doesn't matter."

I freeze, looking down at her, smacking her hand when she reaches for my cock. "Really?"

She shrugs as if it doesn't matter. Honestly, it doesn't. I think she works because she feels like she needs to contribute,

but I've risked my life more times than I can count in an effort to build my bank account. Neither of us have to work. We could live comfortably very easily with what I have in the bank.

“He fucking fired you?”

“You have that *I'm going to kill him* look in your eyes.” She says it with laughter in her voice, as if it sort of thrills her that I'd consider hurting someone who may have upset her. She'd probably never admit it, but she loves the way I'm so fucking protective over her.

“There's nothing wrong with your ability to read me,” I mutter.

When she reaches for my cock again, I don't bother trying to stop her.

“I'll find something else,” she says as she inches closer, her lips wrapping around my cock. “Mmm. Tastes like me.”

I grip her hair, pulling her head back until her mouth hangs open just the way I like it. I press forward, running my cock over her tongue and getting even hornier, if that's possible, with the noise she makes when I push too far.

“Do you have any idea how perfect you look with my cock in your mouth?”

Her eyes sparkle, partly with pride, partly because I keep pressing into her throat like it's mine to fuck any time I want.

Instead of trying to pull away when I fill her until she can't breathe, she blinks up at me, her hand cupping my sack in that perfect way she does.

“It's going to be a very long day for you, baby,” I warn as I pull back, giving her a chance to breathe.

“I hope so,” she says, that same devious look in her eyes she gets when she's feeling incredibly needy.

I rip the covers from around her waist, my thumb skating over the scar on her breast.

I know our time for vengeance against Cortez will come. Angel and Liam have been working relentlessly on tracking him down. I turned down the offer the last time Angel asked if I wanted to work. My time is best spent in this house, inside this woman.

I know there's a real chance we won't have forever, but instead of one of us changing our minds like I worried about, I know it would take death to pull us apart.

I'm sure any shrink would say that our co-dependency on each other isn't healthy, but fuck those people. They haven't faced what we faced. They haven't lived what we lived.

"Not going to stop," I warn. "Even when you beg."

"Wouldn't expect you to," she says, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

"Gonna empty my nuts inside of you over and over."

"Sounds like a good time," she says, coming up on her knees so she can press the warmth of her body against me.

"I'm serious, Ayla. I'm going—"

The sound of banging on the front door moves me into action.

I pull away, immediately reaching for the gun on the bedside table.

Whoever has the fucking audacity to come to my house may not live to regret it.

I yank the sheet from the bed, wrapping it around my hips as I leave the room.

It isn't a mistake or someone lost and looking for directions. My driveway is over a mile long. If that isn't enough to deter people from showing up, the warning signs at the gate and lining the trail to get here should be.

I rip open the door, finding Donovan standing there with an annoyed look on his face.

He looks miserable and pissed all rolled into one, as he looks from the gun in my hand back to my eyes as if he honestly wishes getting shot was an option.

Terror fills my blood, and for a split second, I think he's about to deliver some really fucking bad news.

I want to slam the door in his face, tell the motherfucker to keep it to himself, when the warmth of Ayla's body presses to my back.

In the flash of a second, I realize that I'm not just playing house with this woman. I'm not enjoying our time together until it falls apart. I realize when I wish that I could trade my life in exchange for her not to feel the pain she's going to feel, that I love this woman. I'd do and sacrifice anything for her.

There's permanency to us, the same way there seems to be this occurrence, the perpetual pain we can't seem to be free from. I can help her get through this, but I don't know if she's going to allow it.

"Donavan," I snap, warning in my tone.

He steps to the side. I don't think I've ever felt the kind of relief I'm feeling right now, not even when I woke up months ago in a hospital, rather than Pirro's fucking dungeon.

"She's your goddamned problem," Donavan spits, pointing at Alani.

Donavan turns and leaves the porch. As if it's the most natural thing in the world, Ayla's fucking sister follows right behind him with an irritated sigh only a nineteen-year-old can have, when following after someone as scary as Donavan Gibson.

THE END

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