

SHANNON ELLIOT

TIME
TO RAZE
HELL.

DEVIL
IN THE DARK

DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

Devil In The Dark

Descent Into Darkness, Book Two

Shannon Elliot

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By Shannon Elliot

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Paperback: ISBN 979-8-2180444-2-8

Ebook: ASIN B0B1VH3TZY

First edition March 2023

Edited by Megan Harris

Cover art by The Book Brander

Formatting by Shannon Elliot

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From the Author

Reader,

Every artist makes an important decision about their work; to create or not to create diverse and inclusive art. And my goal as an author is to create stories that reflect my readers. I fundamentally believe that everyone deserves to see themselves in the media they consume. I believe everyone deserves their happily ever after.

Devil In The Dark was born from the need to see more of myself, my friends, and my community in books. My characters have battle wounds and emotional scars that they embrace. They transform their trauma, pain, and anger into something more. They love recklessly, and the love they find for each other is validated.

This story is a rebellion through and through.

Enjoy my little devils!

Shannon

To those who know what it means to embrace the dark.

To the warriors who choose to fight.

*“Learn at least this: What you are capable of. Let nothing
stand in your way.”*

Angels In America: Millennium Approaches

Tony Kushner

Playlist

Listen to the Devil In The Dark Spotify Playlist!

CASUALTY – MOTHICA

Devil On My Shoulder – Kelsy Karter & The Heroines

Hold On – ZZ Ward

dramatic – Cat & Calmell

Does She Like it Rough? – FLAVIA

Wanna Be Missed – Hayley Kiyoko

Hateful – FLAVIA

Heavy Hearts – MOTHICA

Demons – Hayley Kiyoko

FU In My Head – Cloudy June

Hostage – Elle LEXXA

Poison – Stevie Bill

Don't Stop the Devil – Dead Posey

overwhelmed – Royal & the Serpent

Pray – Xana

Moderation – Lilyisthatyou

devil may care – Fae

Make It Naked – DYLYN

Almost Touch Me – Maisy Kay

Broken Hearted Lovers – Somme

Worship – Chymes

Trouble – CRMNL

Cravin' – Stileto, Kendyl Paige

Aimed To Kill – Jade LeMac

First Blood – Yorxe

Stay Numb And Carry On – Madison Beer

Help Me Mama – ZZ Ward

Dancing in a Daydream – Roses & Revolutions, Weathers

Six Feet Under – Oshins, Leslie Powell

Them – FLAVIA

Killer Queen – ASTON

Body Language – Alexa Cappelli

Feel What I'm Feeling – LEX

Into My Body – UPSAHL

12345SEX – UPSAHL

White Lie – Lenii

Down – Simon, Trella

SHE – Winona Oak

Vendetta – UNSECRET, Krigare

Let It Burn – ZZ Ward

Playground – Bea Miller

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also By Shannon Elliot

Griffin's Tarta De Santiago (Spanish Almond Cake)

Content Warnings

R eader,

Not every book is for every reader, and maybe this book is not for you. Your well-being and mental health come first. So, before diving into this book, I want you to be informed of its content.

Please note that this book contains the following that may be disruptive to readers: Ableism, Attempted Murder, Blood, Bratting, Child Services, Deadnaming, Death By Fire, Dissociation, Drug Trafficking, Drugging, Emotional Abuse, Fire, Flashbacks, Gaslighting, Gore, Grief, Harassment, Hard Sub Drop, Hospital, Hospitalization, Human Trafficking, Kidnapping, Manipulation, Military, Near Death Experiences, Orphaned In Book, Panic Attack, Physical Abuse, Sedatives, Sexual Abuse, Sickness, Smuggling, Spousal Abuse, Stalking, Threats Of Violence, Torture, and Violence Against Women.

For your awareness, the book also includes the following forms of intimacy/play: BDSM, Body Worship, Choking, CNC, Degradation, Dom/ Sub, Edging, Exhibitionism, Flogging, Forced Chastity, Group Scenes, Knife Play, Mommy

Domme, Mutual Masturbation, Orgasm Denial, Pleasure Dom, Predator/Prey, Primal Play, Ruby Play, Sado/ Masochism, and Voyeurism.

Finally, here are the honorifics used throughout: Baby, Baby doll, Brat, Captain, Dife Mwen, Doll, Good Boy, Good Girl, Little Girl, Ma'am, Mesye, Mistress, Mommy, Pet, Preciosa, Sir, Slut, Tèt Zozo, and Whore.

If you would like further details, have concerns, or feel this list is incomplete, please reach out to me at authorshannonelliot@gmail.com.

Happy reading!

CASUALTY

JULIANA

I no longer feel scared. I'm not numb nor empty. I'm angry.
My palms are stained red from Jay's wound, and the more I stare, the more I crave bloodshed from the man who placed it there.

Arrick Mathieson.

When Jay told me he killed the man who abducted me, I didn't fully comprehend the level of anger he felt. The protectiveness in his eyes stoked a fierce attraction between us, and I embraced the bloodthirsty side of him because I love him. He's part of my soul, and there's no line in existence that will force me to part with him. But until this moment, I couldn't have told you where that acceptance came from.

Now I know.

I have the same thirst.

I want *his* blood on my hands.

My craving for violence, retribution, has my fists clenching. But the pain brought by the feeling of glass embedding itself

deeper into my skin only brings a certain clarity drawing me back to the last night at Bliss.

That moment, and each one since then, will forever burn in my memory.

Glass littered the ground as fire fought to escape through the blown-out windows. Rising smoke billowed from the building into a cloudless night sky and left my senses singed. Blinding lights flashed in tandem with sirens and commanding voices as the first responders fell into organized chaos. The tears welled in my eyes as the ambulance drove us away from the destruction but could never distract me from the decimation of my sacred space—my home and haven.

The second we arrived at the hospital, my knight in a white lab coat, Dr. Sage Mathieson, took charge of the turmoil in her ER. The EMTs brought me in through the doors of the emergency room and transferred me to a bed. All the while, nurses and doctors gave Sage odd stares—everyone did with how she was hovering over me—but no one said anything about her sudden reappearance. Or mine.

I am drawn to her. An air of authority makes her already tall frame more imposing. It's powerful to see her take charge. Her command, and the way people jumped to follow her orders, is inspiring. She strides around the room confidently as her full hips sway underneath the white coat she threw on. The moment she gathered her silver-streaked hair in a tight ponytail, my mouth went dry.

Such a beautiful woman.

Sage breezes me through most of the emergency room procedures, as I demand answers about the others from each of the nurses attending to me. Their silence unnerves me, but the sounds of the ER are what undoes me.

Two panic attacks and one sedative later, and they've moved me into a quiet private room where I sit glaring at the blood embedded in my skin like it's now a permanent part of me.

Amidst everything, no one has thought to clean Jay's blood from my hands. My attention drifts in and out, but each time I come back to refocus on the evidence of carnage on my skin. I'm reminded of the parking lot of Bliss where I witnessed my best friend bleed. Where I watched him get lifted into an ambulance with no guarantee he would be alive the next time I saw him.

And my spiral returns to where I began.

Watching the raging flames lick at the sky while I'm dragged away by the ambulance.

A movement at my periphery pulls me from my gruesome tunnel vision to reveal Cy and Ember's presence in the room.

When did they get here?

How did they get here?

Ember is sitting with a computer in their lap, their frame hunched over, furiously typing away. Midnight blue hair flops in their face every few moments, and I study their hands as they draw their fingers through the strands. I want to touch

them, to comfort them somehow. But I can't reach them. I'm in shock and unable to form words, hoping they will look up, if only just for a moment.

I need to see them, to see the ever-present calm in their charcoal eyes. I need the reassurance they so easily provide every time they look at me.

But their focus is elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the hair on the back of my neck prickles under Cy's attention, who has taken up a sentry position in the room's corner. He gives me a curt nod of acknowledgment and a small smile when my gaze turns to take him in.

His entire stature is imposing, but I'm used to that. Months of training have softened him to me. The dark grimace that's resettled across his strong features doesn't intimidate me anymore. I'm learning it's armor for him.

Not that he needs armor.

His body alone is a weapon enough. Muscles flex under his dark skin as he subtly adjusts his stance, taking a half-step toward me. His piercing hazel eyes capture me in their gaze. Tattoos peek out from his pristine clothing, and I question how he still looks so put together, so competent and strong.

He's so far away, though.

Everyone feels so far away, it's as if I'm alone.

"When did..." I croak.

Ember's gaze shoots up at my cracked voice and immediately their computer goes to the seat beside them. "Hey," they say. "Good, you're up."

"When?" I repeat.

"Did we get here?" Ember finishes. "You were already out like a light when we arrived. Sage said you... well, she said you weren't doing so well in the ER."

"Where is she?" I ask painfully.

"Left when we got here. I think she's checking on Jay's surgery. She was in a hurry when we finally found you," Ember explains. "She made us get checked out by doctors while we waited for you to wake up, but we're all good."

A little tension drains from my shoulders hearing they're okay. Cy and Ember are fine.

"Jay?" I ask, still struggling to speak through the crackling in my throat.

It's then that Cy turns his back to me, busying himself by filling a cup with water. I turn back to Ember, frantically searching their face for a sign that Jay's okay.

"We don't know," Ember answers as Cy reluctantly crosses to hand them the glass of water. "We just have to wait."

"Her hands," Cy murmurs.

"Oh, yeah. We need to grab a nurse. They got most of the larger pieces of glass out while you were asleep, but they were

waiting to finish until you were awake.” They share patiently. “It was... difficult when you were asleep.”

I give them a look, asking for more explanation.

“Your body doesn’t like strangers touching you,” they explain simply. “We told them to come back and finish when they had your consent.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawns. “Thank you.”

“I’ll ask for someone,” Cy says as he heads toward the door.

I’m not sure which scares the hospital staff more: my mounting temper or the growls Cy lets out anytime someone touches me and I flinch. But I’m on edge with everyone who steps into the room, anxiously waiting for any news about Jay. The nurse who comes to bandage the cuts and burns I have gets the silent treatment, and each staff member after that endures a progressively surlier version of myself.

I need to know where my family is. No one can tell me anything about the girls who got here before me. No one can tell me anything about Jay.

Looking down at my bandaged hands, I fill my lungs as much as I can before letting out a shaky breath.

Impatiently.

When an unfamiliar doctor in black scrubs walks through the door, Cy tenses and Ember looks up once again from their computer.

“Doctor,” Cy bites out.

“Yes, just checking on her charts,” he replies.

“Respectfully,” Ember starts, malice in their tone, “we requested you be taken off her care team after your last visit. You’re not supposed to be here.”

Anger lights up their face and I stare at them, bewildered. “Do you know anything about Jay Maddox? He was brought in earlier for surgery,” I interject, hoping to dispel some of the tension in the room.

The doctor rolls their eyes. “Like I told you the last time you asked about her, Jasmine Maddox is still in surgery. I don’t know more than that.”

Shock and anger roll through me in equal measure, but before I can respond, I hear Sage’s voice come from behind the doctor.

“Doctor Edmund!” she thunders. “I won’t stand for you disrespecting our patients and disregarding their wishes. Mx. and Mr. Guerin are correct. Your care is no longer needed here.”

The man looks taken aback at Sage’s appearance and sharp words as he turns toward her. The look quickly shifts to disgust upon setting his sights on her, though.

“Additionally, I would advise against dead-naming and misgendering patients, doctor. The board will hear about this.” Her threat is low and there’s a scheming gleam in her eye.

“And I’ll have your license. If not for this, then for something else.”

I chance a glance away from the doctor, toward Cy and Ember, and see murder written in their expressions just as I’m sure my own paints a portrait of pain for this man.

“I suggest you leave, sir.” Sage continues gesturing back toward Cy and Ember. “Before you are the one in the hospital bed.”

I can tell she’s good at her job by what’s not on her face. There’s no anger or fear, nothing to give away her feelings except her voice. Her soft expression is both stern and comforting.

Quickly as he came, the doctor throws down my chart and flees from the room.

No one moves or breathes until he’s gone and Sage is able to close the door.

It’s then that Sage’s expression changes to something haunting. Anything could come next, and there’s no one left to protect me.

“Sage?” I start.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she says, coming to my bed opposite Ember. “I really should not be here, and I definitely should not be the one telling you this, but my colleague is doing me a courtesy by letting me be here.” The shake in her voice causes Ember to reach for my arm. And Cy shifts—fidgets, almost—from his position where he watches over the room.

“Is it Jay? Oh, goddess. He’s dead, isn’t he?” I squeak.

“Oh, darling, no. No. I just left him. Jay is coming out of surgery soon and so far it looks like he will be fine.” She pauses as she reaches to tuck a stray hair behind my ear.

Relief floods me at the news and for a second, it feels like things are going to be okay.

Only for it to come crashing down.

“It’s the other girls.” She pauses. “I just got word that Stacy is in intensive care for her burns and smoke inhalation. They are talking about putting her in a medically induced coma so her body can heal. Some others are also moving to the ICU because of their injuries.”

This.

This is my worst nightmare.

Death is one thing. Death is final and finite. It happens and then you learn to live with the ache it leaves.

This? The unknown? When everything is out of control?

That’s terrifying, and the world spins faster as I fully process the news.

It was my responsibility to keep those girls, my people—my family—safe. They came to us looking for something better and I promised them a brighter future. Dragging them into all of this?

What have I done?

“But Jay’s going to be okay?” I ask selfishly.

“Looks that way,” she responds.

“Okay. Okay. So, what do we do now? What about Arrick? What he did.” My mind is racing with everything there is to do, trying to latch on to something that will stall my impending spiral, the inevitable panic. Fury chokes me, and the acute need for action claws at my skin. My body shakes as rage simmers underneath my now swirling thoughts, but I welcome the momentary distraction.

“Well, right now, we concentrate on getting you better,” she answers gently.

“I’m fine,” I snap, only to immediately regret my ire. “Sorry. I just....”

“I know, darling,” Sage soothes. “Right now we focus on you, then on Jay and the rest of the girls. Okay?”

Looking down at the crusted reddish-brown still staining my hands, I fill my lungs as much as I can before letting out a shaky breath.

She’s right.

One thing at a time.

Now’s the time for grief and healing. I can put my lust for retribution on hold.

For the moment.

Devil On My Shoulder

sage

Juliana has gone still, her eyes glazed over, looking lost in thought. Her chest is rising and falling with each breath she takes. In for four and out for eight. And again. And again.

As she grounds herself, I run my fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ear. My fingertips trail lightly down her jaw and her neck. Even underneath the streaks of ash and grime, she is beautiful. Like a warrior emerging from the battlefield, her blonde hair pulled back from her face. Patiently I wait, taking in the vision of her soft lips, round cheeks, and full lashes. When she is back to breathing easier, I force myself to let her go, then take a step back.

Doctor Amirah Rahma, who is truly overseeing her care, should be along shortly to check on her, but part of me doesn't want to let her go. I need her close. I need them all close.

Cy gives me a slight nod of acknowledgment as I move toward the exit, silently reassuring me he will be there for her while I am gone. A gesture of my head toward the door is all it takes to have Ember rounding Juliana's bed to follow me into the hallway. They move alongside me silently, though I catch

the backward glance they throw at Cy as well, who has left the corner to take Ember's place beside Juliana.

Seems I am not the only one with separation anxiety.

The hallway is empty as we venture out of Juliana's room. The laminate floors glare under the fluorescent lighting. It is incredible how such familiar sights can feel so foreign. For almost two decades, I have stood in these hallways conversing with colleagues. I have waited on an innumerable number of patients and yet, for the first time, my heart feels like it might fall out because of this one girl. I stop before the nurses' station, still within sight of Juliana and Cy, because I need her in my sight right now.

Everything is out of control, but I can manage this. Order lies just outside of my reach. But I can care for Juliana, for Jay, when he gets out of surgery. I can do that.

What I cannot manage is how I feel like I am unraveling at the disappearance of Kieran. Walls that used to keep things—the ER, my home, my life—so organized are crumbling. Normally, I can handle this kind of pressure easily, but I can't this time.

These are my people that are hurting.

My son that has been taken.

"I need you to look for Kieran," I start when I have Ember's full attention.

"I'm already working on it," they reply.

It takes me a second to process their response. I should be shocked, but Ember's attachment to Kieran is just as fierce as his to them. It stands to reason one of their immediate thoughts is to look for him, even with everything else going on. Intuition says they need him back nearly as much as I do.

"Thank you." I breathe a sigh of relief. "I feel like a terrible mother for saying this, but I just can't concentrate on him right now." I cringe at the words. "No, that is not right. I just..."

"I understand," they say. "It's harder when it's your own kid, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is." I let the silence of the hallway settle me as I refocus on the task at hand. "I love him. And it hurts to say, but I am not the person who Kieran needs right now. He needs you. Your skills. Your expertise. You."

A light flickers down the hallway and I see a flash of black scrubs pass between rooms.

"I can only compartmentalize so much, but I trust you, inherently, to find my son," I finish in one breath.

"Damn, that's quite a speech you got there. How long did you rehearse?" Ember cracks before sobering a bit. "Look, we know Arrick has him. And we know where he's most likely to be, the compound-warehouse-place. That's a start."

"It is a start," I repeat, taking deep breaths myself. "I just... How long, Ember? Until we can bring him home?"

"Right, about that. I shut down their systems once, which means I know the weaknesses. It also means they do, too, and

they seem to be back online, but with more security measures in place. I'm sure I can get in. It might just take a little time." They pull out their necklace with a ring attached from under their shirt.

"How much time?" I ask as they run the band back and forth across the chain.

"I..." They slide the ring up and down the chain repeatedly. "I don't want to give you a number and then be wrong. But I've already reached out to some friends who're working on it as we speak."

The sincerity in their expression is part of what makes them so easy to care for. They truly are doing everything they can to help. Their wide-eyed look tells me everything I need to know about their soul, their kindness, compassion, and selflessness.

"Okay. Thank you, Ember."

"Do you think..." They pause. "You don't think Arrick would do anything to hurt Kieran, right?"

My mind draws up memories of Kieran's past breakdowns. How his father would grow frustrated with our little boy who was only doing his best. He needed help and the comfort of someone who cared for him, but Arrick was never that.

"Honestly, at this point I do not know. I do not think Arrick would hurt him. Not intentionally at least. But I am worried being taken from his normal routines is going to be hard on him. Arrick was never good at paying attention to our needs."

Upon reflection, Arrick has always been cold, but good at hiding it. For the longest time, he shielded us from his true self. I do not think it was out of any kind of true love or kindness for us, but because of the consequences he could face if I knew who he truly was.

A monster.

But that is the problem, is it not?

I should have known, been able to see what a horrid human he is. I have shielded Kieran from life like a mother must, but I sheltered myself to the biggest threat of all: my husband.

I can trust my friends to bring Kieran back to me. But alone? I can only hope and pray for my son's safety and happiness. I am powerless to do anything alone. And if I let the guilt and shame of losing Kieran overtake me? I do not want to imagine who I would become. That is not the person I want to be. It is definitely not who Kieran needs.

The only thing I can do is wait. Wait for the time when I have my child back in my arms.

Only, waiting implies a need to remain static, but that is not the case right now. Now is a time for immediate action. There are things to do and people I care about who need me. That is what I can focus on, where my help is needed.

Ember will help Kieran. I will help the others.

“Sage, we're going to bring him back. Bring him home.” Ember interrupts my thoughts with a hand on my shoulder. “I have no doubt.”

Sighing in acknowledgment, I respond. “I know you are right. I know. But it is too much. Kieran has never gone to sleep-away camp. He has never been away from me like this. I can’t help but fret.”

Kieran *begged* to go to a space sleep-away camp, but I just could not bring myself to let him go. Then, after meeting Ember, he was so excited to go to his robotics camp, he completely forgot about his dreams of leaving his mother. And now, he has no choice. I can’t check a website for photos, or ask his counselor how he is doing. I have to sit with the unknown and hope he will be okay.

I should have sent him to fucking space camp.

“Look. I can’t fathom what you’re going through and I can only imagine where your head is at, but trust me when I say we won’t stop until he’s home safe.” Ember pauses. “That woman in there. You know she’s going to give ‘em hell, right? You must have seen it.”

I have.

The moment they loaded Jay into the ambulance at Bliss, something changed in Juliana. Not even her own well-being mattered then. There was a change in her that should frighten me, but instead I am standing down the hall from her room, itching to get back to her.

“I was next to her... at Bliss.” I pause, considering whether I should confess what I heard, but they need to know. We all need to know what’s coming for us.

Or rather, who we're coming for.

"I don't think she realized I was next to her, but toward the end, I heard her make a vow."

"And?" they pry.

"I'll never forget it..." I trail off as Ember waits patiently for me. "He pays for his empire with the blood of others. I'll pay for mine in his."

The words still send chills down my spine. I was so certain I knew who my husband was, but he has shown a whole new level of debauchery. After hearing that your husband put a hit out on you and your child, it's hard not to imagine he has hurt people. But seeing the destruction and decimation before you is a whole other ballgame.

"It has been circling in my mind, but she can't really mean it... can she?" I practically whisper.

Ember's expression gives nothing away, but their body tells another story. Hands ball into tight fists at their side and their jaw locks up as they go rigid. So, when they respond to my question, I can't be surprised.

"At this point, I'm not sure what she's capable of. Juliana is a force. I..." They glance back down the hallway toward her door. "I can imagine her out for blood."

"No. I cannot allow it." My pulse picks up at the thought. "We cannot let her go down that path. She does not need to stoop to Arrick's level."

A new sense of angst builds in my chest, squeezing tighter around my throat with each attempt at breath.

“We can reason with her, right?” I say, almost panicked.

“Sage. If there’s ever someone to try, it’s going to be you. But...” The intercom interrupts before they can finish.

“Dr. Mathieson to O.R. three. Dr. Mathieson to O.R. three,” it screeches.

I look at Ember, feeling lost and desperately grasping for something solid to hold onto. “I have to go. That will be Jay.”

“I’ll come with,” they respond.

“They’re not going to let you in,” I reason.

“Juliana will feel better once she knows Jay is good. I’m coming.”

It’s only once we have reached the elevators that Ember speaks.

“Cy told Juliana once we all get to choose between the voices on our shoulders. The Devil and Angel whisper in our ears, but we each make our own choices. I made mine when I left the Army with Cy. I’ve already fallen from grace, per se, and I have my fair share of skeletons in my closet. Cy has his own wake of destruction, too. Juliana? She...” They pause as the elevator doors close us in.

“What are you saying?” I demand.

“Hope dies in a myriad of ways,” they say cryptically. “Juliana’s angel is dead. Her conscience? Destroyed. She’s no

longer fighting for her own survival. If she's out for blood? That woman will raze hell and unseat the Devil himself."

They're right, though. Much as I don't want to admit it. I saw a piece of her die in that parking lot, and in its place is a new beast just waiting to be let out of its cage.

"This isn't going to be pretty," they finish.

Silence fills the elevator car as we descend, echoing loudly through my skull.

"Fuck."

Hold On

cy

I always find myself watching from the outside.

And for the first time, I desperately want to be right in the middle. Watching Juliana struggle with herself makes me want to be close to her. I can see the gears turning in her mind as she processes pain and heartbreak. The tightness of her jaw, the way she swallows as she desperately tries to slow her breathing, and the gripping and relaxing of her hands are all evidence of the battle she faces internally. I stand next to her bed, silent and still, as she grapples with herself until exhaustion overwhelms her, with a little help from the painkillers. When she's overcome by sleep, I tentatively reach out to rest my fingers on the back of her bandaged hand.

I need her to know I would walk into battle beside her. In her expressions I've seen the craving for reprisal—a feeling I know all too well after my experiences in the Army—when she thought no one was paying attention. How she changed over the hours spent in the hospital, left only with her thoughts.

She's begun planning her revenge, though she probably doesn't realize it yet.

My study of Juliana is interrupted by the buzzing of my phone in my pocket, and as I pull it out, I see Gramma M's contact on the screen. I don't want to leave my woman but when Gramma calls, you pick up. The consequences of not answering would be worse than the temporary ache of leaving Juliana alone for a few minutes.

"Hey, gimme a second," I whisper into the phone as I make my way out of the room. The hall is empty when I exit. Ember and Sage have disappeared. Hesitant to stray too far, I position myself outside the doorway to her room. "Hi, Granmè."

"Wha's wrong?" Her bold voice comes through the phone clearly and I pull it a little further away from my ear.

"What? Why would something be wrong?" I reply.

Gramma M has always had a natural intuition, unmatched by anyone I've ever known. I could never get the smallest fib past her.

"Don't lie to me, chile," she scolds. "My heart's aching and then the hen crow'd this mornin'. I had to check on peta mwen that you and didn' get yourself killed."

"The hen what?" I ask, confused.

"Hen. Crow'd. You know what they say about hen's crowing. Means there's a death in the family." Gramma M has a thousand superstitions but this is, surprisingly, a new one to

me. She continues, “How’s Ember? They betta not done somet’in backwards. They’re too smart for that.”

I smile internally at her concern for my partner.

When Ember decided to start using new pronouns, Gramma M was the first of my family to embrace them fully and asked a thousand questions to make sure she didn’t offend them. They’ve been the closest of friends ever since; I know Ember texts with her more than I do.

“Granmè, there’s a lot going on right now. But I promise Ember is fine.” I hear rustling over the line and the sound of shuffling cards comes through clearly. Tired, I push on. “I really need to go, Granmè.”

“Oh no. You’ll stay on this phone with me till I’m finished with you.” Her tone allows for no disagreement. “Oh, Cy. Talk to me. This doesn’t look too good.”

“What are you talking about?” My voice drips in confusion, laced with fear.

“The cards! The cards, peta. I’m lookin’ at a spread full of heartbreak. I’m lookin’ at reversed lovers, death, and so many swords. Peta, tell me.”

A spiritual woman to her core, of course she would consult her tarot cards about my well-being. Of course, she would find her way to the heart of everything. I try to remember all the lessons she’s shared with me about her cards and their meanings, but the memories are hazy.

Lovers sounds self-explanatory, but Death isn't literal... I think. Swords represent suffering of some kind, though.

This can't be good.

“Someone...” I hear an admonishing sound come through the speaker and I rephrase. “My friend, they're in the hospital and we're here with them. There was an accident. There's just a lot of unknowns right now.”

“Who is she?” she demands.

“What? Why would you think it's a girl?”

“The lovers and the six of cups. There's joy with her, isn't there? Do you love her? Are you in love with her? It's a very important distinction, ya know.”

How the hell am I supposed to be able to answer a question like that?

“I don't... I dunno, Granmè. Ember convinced themselves I am.” I huff.

Gramma M hums through the phone in understanding. “You're conflicted. The page of swords says you think your path is unclear, but the Queen of swords is watching over this.”

“You know I don't know what that means, right?” I groan.

“Psh... neva did listen when I spoke, did you? Peta, there will be trials, but it will be worth it. Trust the girl. Trust Ember. You have your family. Protect them. Take care of

them.” My eyes roll to the heavens. “Don’t you roll your eyes at me, chile.”

“Sorry, Granmè.” I sigh, tightness building in my chest as I force my confession. “It’s just... I don’t know how to do that. I’m just the muscle to them. I don’t know what they need.”

“Of course you’re not. And of course you do,” she chides. “You’re at the hospital? Go home, make some food, and bring it back to everyone. When in doubt, feed the people you love. Their bodies, hearts, and souls.”

“Granmè, cooking isn’t the answer to everything.”

“Nonsense,” she scolds. “Are you ashamed to take care of your family or somethin’?”

“No. ‘Course not. But...” A noise draws my attention back to Juliana’s room, and I glance back to check on her. She’s asleep but restless. The sight of her tossing and turning makes me ache to go to her. “Granmè, I have to go. She’s waking up.”

“Mmh. Go. Go take care of your people, peta. And say hi to Ember and the girl. I’mma send you some recipes.”

Gramma M has a way of ordering you about that makes everything seem like it’s the simplest thing in the world. Like there’s no reason not to, and not doing it will only hurt you. There’s also a healthy dollop of guilt underneath, too.

“Alright. I’m going.”

“Good boy. Call me when ya can. And I want y’all to visit soon.” She pauses. “All y’all, got it? We miss you ‘round

here.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I reply.

“Good. I love you, Peta.”

“I love you too, Granmè.”

With that, I hang up and go back into the hospital room feeling lighter than before.

There’s nothing like talking with your gramma to make everything feel better, right?

Juliana looks so peaceful when she settles back into her deep slumber. She’s curled up on her side, and looking at her, I realize just how vulnerable she really is. Despite everything she’s still open. She’s still fighting.

But now, she’s fighting for something other than her life.

When I’m next to her bed, I reach out to wrap my hand around Juliana’s wrist possessively.

If there’s anyone who can understand how suddenly a life can change, it’s me.

“Jay’s out of surgery. He’s being moved to his own room now.” Ember’s return sucks me into the memory of how I met them on the worst day of my life.

Everything had fallen apart, and I had already lost so much.

Football got me to West Point and after I finished I went straight into the Army. They trained me up and by the time I

became a Special Forces Weapons Sergeant, my reputation was solidified.

First Sergeant Cyprus “Cy” Guerin was a take-no-shit kind of asshole. The women and boys I led knew the sacrifices I would make for them, but they also knew I wouldn’t put up with their crap.

“Cy?” they try again.

It was supposed to be straightforward transport.

Ember was a technical analyst, and we were tasked with getting them and their team from point A to point B. No one expected this to blow up, literally, in our face.

Chaos ensued.

Transports were destroyed and, under heavy gunfire, we were forced to abandon everything and take cover in the town we were passing through.

Making our way down a narrow alleyway, we found ourselves facing an unfriendly. Shots went off and we started to fall back, looking for somewhere else to hunker down.

I only remember pain coursing through my body in one moment and the next there was an angel dragging me back towards the rest of the squad. They told me after, Ember had gone back for me without hesitation. They heard the shot and were moving before anyone could pull them back.

“Cy. Let go.” I cringe at the touch on my shoulder where the majority of my scars reside, but I can’t let go.

I lost six of my people that day only to learn months later that our unfriendly was actually friendly fire. My sacrifice on the battlefield and months in the hospital were for nothing.

I leaned into a dark, angry version of myself then.

Ember pulled me out. Of the line of fire, and the fire I let consume me for months after.

They visited me every goddamn day. Then, when my recovery was through and it was time for me to re-up, I was conflicted. Ember was the one to convince me to leave for good with them. They brought me back to life, and together we disappeared. We started the Ascendancy Collective—our “technical support” group—and the rest is history.

“Lòt mwatye, come back to me. Please. You’re going to hurt her.” Ember’s voice becomes clearer, and my grip on Juliana releases.

“Where’d you go, Cy?” they ask patiently.

I remember that feeling.

“I’m not going back. I’m good.” My eyes connect with Ember. “I’m here.”

Though I never knew Juliana before, I can see how her time with Sage’s husband scarred her. How it changed things for her.

My gaze bounces between lòt mwatye mwen and, with their forehead wrinkled, and my woman before me.

I’m seeing a new change in Juliana.

A danger that should be feared by anyone who stands in her way.

Right now, asleep. She's yon ti dife, only to rage at the next gust of wind.

Dife mwen pral tire revanj.

Dramatic

GRIFFIN

I haven't been here in months—my actual apartment.

I've been undercover for HPD for so long, working to take Arrick's trafficking operation down, that everything is exactly as I left it last. Only now it's covered in a fine layer of dust. Pillows lay on the couch with the same dents from the last time I collapsed there. My favorite H. Y. Hanna books are scattered across the coffee table. Frames with generic photos and illustrations of famous athletes hang around the room, reminding me of one of my first conversations with Jules. The air is stale and hard to breathe.

But that could also be because of my separation from Jules.

I can still feel the dull ache from my mistress pounding into me. Sage's touch lingers on my skin. It's like I can feel them both. I keep thinking about how connected we were. How for a brief moment there was only us and everything was... bliss. The more I think, the more I crave being near them again.

But they're not here.

My mind is drawn back to the chaos of the night. From the moment we awoke together in bed, the world seemed to race by, tumbling down one domino after another.

The fog of sleep dissipated immediately upon hearing Kieran was taken. Then Jay's brief distress call. Everyone sprang into action. Except for Jules, who seemed in a daze. She seemed to simply exist through the whole thing, not really aware of what was really going on.

Until... until we reached Bliss, and everything exploded, literally.

Staying behind when Jules left in the ambulance nearly broke me. But amidst the chaos of the night, I was the last thing on her mind.

All the while she's the only thing on mine.

Dragging myself from the memories, I find my hands itching for something to do, for something to keep them—and my thoughts—occupied.

As if on autopilot, I close and lock the door to the apartment behind me. I'm drawn to the kitchen and beeline for the pantry, finding it, unsurprisingly, empty of anything I might need.

I first go to the freezer to find my stash of emergency cookie dough—double chocolate chip—and put it in the microwave to defrost. It's probably not expired, right? Next, I preheat the oven, then go grab and line a cookie sheet with parchment paper.

Normally at a time like this, I would make something from scratch. I'd take my time going through each step of the recipe—I'm thinking lemon lavender macarons—and I imagine filling the kitchen with scents of citrus, lavender, and vanilla. The smell of home. Of them, of *her*.

But desperate times and all that.

The hum of the microwave fills the silence, but it doesn't stop my mind from cycling through the events of the past forty-eight hours like I'd hoped. It's been hours since I left the scene at Bliss, and sunlight is just starting to creep in through the cracks in the curtains. I made the call to Quinn the second the ambulance was out of sight—the fire wasn't even out yet—but knowing what's coming makes the nerves worse. But this has to be done. I need to follow through on my promise.

And that means meeting with Quinn.

After the explosion at Bliss, I did my best to ease the way for Jules and the others.

People were asking questions we can't share the answers to.

Where was she?

What happened to her?

When did she get back?

When did *I* get back?

Nothing had easy answers. I talked my way around as many as I could, trying to shield her from the onslaught of people

who wanted answers. Right now, that's the best way I can help her.

To guard her.

When I met Jules, then let her go, I made a promise to myself that I would find her and then I was out. That's exactly what I intend to do. I'm done, and the only way to truly pull myself out of this life is to talk with Quinn.

He's going to hate me.

Years together, working on the same case, only to leave when things get truly complicated? That's a dick move—and for a girl no less. I can imagine the judgmental scowl on his face now.

But for her, I'll happily endure it all.

A knock at the door has me freezing in place. I shouldn't be this on edge, but the stakes are much higher now. There are people who need me.

It takes me a moment to get myself to move as the pounding on the door continues. Fear drives me to the worst-case scenario. What if this is Arrick? Or one of his men?

“Reyes. Open the fuck up!”

My shoulders slump at the sound of Quinn's muffled voice, and I move quickly to unlock the door to let him in.

“Griffin, what the fuck.” He rips into me right away, bursting through the doorway and pushing me to the side. “You give me a cryptic call to meet and tell me about a girl,

then disappear for weeks. Now you're calling me after going radio silent, saying there's been a shooting and a fire and an explosion at some club? What the hell, man?"

I cringe at the mounting anger in his voice. It's the first time I've truly been the central victim of his full-blown rage. Sure, he's my handler, but he's also my friend. I should have told him what was going on, but the second I met Jules, everything else ceased to matter.

"I know that look... oh fuck, this has something to do with the missing girl, doesn't it?" he says, pacing the room, glancing back at me nervously as he talks. "Do you know what a shit show this has turned into? I've been covering for you, man. But people are breathing down my neck and they want answers I can't give them."

I've never seen Quinn rattled like this. It's like a whole new beast has come out to play, though prey or predator is to be determined.

"I..." I start. "Look, I'm sorry. I should have called you earlier, but..."

"The girl," he finishes.

"Yeah, Jules."

He sighs and the look on his face is like a foundation cracking. His hand rubs at the back of his neck continuously as he speaks and he's red in the face. He is not holding up well.

"Quinn." He's fallen into the couch with his head in his hands, and I approach him like you would a frightened animal.

“What’s going on? You look worse than I do and I just watched a building explode.”

He huffs. “What’s going on? What’s going on is you left Mathieson with no warning, no heads up. Now the fucker is on a rampage.” His hands shake as he looks up at me. His fingers tap in a pattern against his leg, and I notice the tired lines etched into his face, the dark circles under his eyes.

“How bad did I fuck up?”

“Dude. Chief is involved now, and he’s already threatening to fire your ass.”

“That’s fine,” I say.

“That’s fine? That’s *fine!*” I can see Quinn’s head implode in slow motion. “Griffin, what the actual fuck is going on with you?”

“If he wants to fire me, that’s okay. I was going to quit anyway,” I reason.

“The hell?”

“Right after we last talked, I had already decided I was going to quit,” I explain evenly.

Quinn’s foot taps incessantly on the ground as he runs his fingers through his hair, making the dark strands stick up on end. “Then you went AWOL.” His voice is distant despite being right in front of me.

“Yeah. I... I needed to disappear for a bit.”

Quinn looks up at me from the couch with wide eyes and a dropped jaw. Under other circumstances, I would find his cartoonish expression hilarious.

“Griff, if you needed to disappear, I could have helped you. You know that,” he says, bewildered.

“No. You couldn’t. It’s not the same for you. You don’t care.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean!” he roars.

Calm overtakes me and all the weight of my anxiety departs like birds taking off from a power line. Everything I could need is waiting for me at the hospital. I have a family again, I know that now. It doesn’t matter what came before, but only that I got here. I have them.

Quinn’s rage is nothing compared to that.

“It just isn’t personal for you. And it is for....”

Before I can get the full sentence out, he’s up on his feet, backing me into the wall. “You better stop with this cryptic poetry shit right now or I’m bashing your head into a wall. I won’t apologize for it either.”

“You remember why I got on this task force, right?” I snap back. “I didn’t have anyone. It didn’t really matter when I put myself in danger. Or that I would be out of contact for months at a time. I have people now, Quinn. And they need me more than you do.”

I can see his frustration, but there seems to also be understanding dawning. His features soften as he retreats and

collapses back into the couch, crumpling in on himself once again.

“So just like that, you’re done.”

I don’t take offense to the venom in his tone and instead focus on the exhaustion there.

“Just like that.” The microwave’s beep emphasizes my statement and, despite the death glare from Quinn, I hold my ground.

Only when he drops his eyes again do I turn to grab the cookie dough and a pair of spoons. “Tell me about Arrick,” I request while portioning the cookie dough onto the sheet, my back to where Quinn sits in the living room but within earshot.

“Griff, you basically just resigned. I can’t just...”

I hear him get up and pace closer to the kitchen. My body tenses as I feel him approach from behind.

“Command doesn’t know yet.” I point out, turning to him. “Please. I need to know.”

With that, he relents. His restraint breaks and his walls fall. Exhaustion takes over. “Fuck it. But I want dough and a spoon if I’m getting into this.”

I chuckle at his demand.

As much as the guys made fun of me for stress-baking, they sure appreciate the results. It’s impressive how quickly an entire plate of cookies or a full sheet cake can disappear at the station.

I hand off the cookie dough and one spoon once the cookie sheet is filled and move to the couch, licking my own spoon clean. Quinn sits across from me in a worn-down wooden chair.

“Arrick is on a crusade. A really violent one” he says, stabbing at the still slightly frozen cookie dough in frustration. “We’ve had four bodies show up in the last three days. Of those, all four are confirmed associates of Mathieson’s.”

Silence fills the room as the weight of his revelation settles upon me.

“He’s cleaning house.”

He looks me straight in the eye and it tells me the most important thing I need to know.

Arrick Mathieson has a list, and our names are on it.

Does She Like It Rough?

sage

Ten days is all it has taken to put that empty look back in Juliana's eyes.

The fire at Bliss, and Jay's shooting, haunts everyone, but it has taken its toll on her most of all. She was released from the hospital shortly after Jay came out of surgery with instructions on how to care for her hands, which are now completely healed. But since then, everything has deteriorated, and she is running herself into the ground trying to keep up with everything else and everyone.

The staff from Bliss are on the mend and being released one by one. Rosie was the first back on her feet, and though she is been slapping away their hands, Ash has been there for her every step of the way. They've taken to handling everything relating to the clubs and even offered to take Spencer while Jay is in the hospital. The security guard, Gus, got away with twelve stitches to the back of his head, and we monitored him for a concussion. The other girls have been released as each of them recover from smoke inhalation and the other minor injuries they incurred. It is Stacy's status that has me most

worried, though, as she is still in the ICU with severe burns. But Jay came out of surgery with no complications and, while he is under heavy sedation, everyone expects him to make a full recovery.

After checking on Stacy, I make my way back to Jay's room only to find what has become a very familiar sight.

Juliana, asleep at Jay's side.

Since he came out of surgery, Juliana's been next to him constantly and has refused to leave except for visiting each of her staff when they themselves get released. In the initial days, Cy would come by daily with all of the necessities for her, but after about day five, his patience snapped and he just picked her up and hauled her out of the hospital to take her home to shower and eat.

Yet, she was back in Jay's room within hours.

Right now, he is her entire world.

"Juliana," I murmur as I reach out to touch her shoulder.

I can understand the pain of needing your loved one close after almost losing them. My own loss haunts me, and unlike Juliana, I do not have the comfort of having Kieran in front of me as an assurance everything will be okay.

It gnaws at me, the knowledge that Kieran is not with us. My entire body tenses each time I think about how Arrick took him from me. But Ember is looking for him, and I have to trust they are doing everything they can to find him.

Ember has had enough time to determine the general location of where Arrick took Kieran. We know he is at the compound where Juliana was kept, but where within it still remains unknown, as we do not have access to the security feeds. So, Ember has been working to break through the security system firewalls to get eyes into the building again. But after their last success in taking down the compound's systems, Arrick's team increased the system's security measures. It is proving harder to get in this time.

Our working theory is that Arrick has Kieran close by, but there is no way to be certain until we have more information. I trust Ember to find my son. I just need patience and focus.

Focus on something other than myself, my own helplessness and incompetence.

For Juliana's sake, I am directing my energies toward Jay's care. It is easier to lean into my training, to detach myself from everything going on around me, than deal with my own guilt and shame at not being able to protect Kieran. I am good at this, being a doctor, and I can help here.

So I stay. To take care of this collage of a family that is building around us.

"Juliana," I repeat. "Darling, wake up."

"Huh?" she says groggily as she wakes from her slumber.

Tension immediately returns to her body as she awakens. Whether it is PTSD or just the stress of the past days, I have

not seen her relaxed since the last time I watched her slumber that night in bed with Griffin.

“Juliana, you need to go home,” I say, running my fingers through her hair.

“Sage...” she groans.

I can see the argument formulating behind her still sleep-filled eyes, but I will not accept it. Not anymore. She is running herself ragged, and it is my responsibility to take care of her, of them. I cannot stand seeing her so worn down. She needs real rest and to eat more than a few bites of the meals Cy keeps putting in front of her.

“Darling, he is not going anywhere. He needs to let his body rest. It is just what his body needs to heal. There is no point in you standing vigil if you are not taking care of yourself,” I say, an admonishing tone creeping into my voice.

“I am... I’m not...”

“Yes. You are. You are running on fumes. I am sending you home. Doctors’ orders.”

She looks at me in disbelief as I take her hand and lead her from the room, still too groggy to fight me.

At the door, she digs in her heels and I glimpse the heartbreaking expression she has as she looks at Jay. My resolve solidified, I tug on her hand and get her moving again down the hallway. We draw stares from some of the staff, but I ignore them.

My relationships are none of their business.

But just as we reach the elevator, Juliana fully pulls away.

“Sage. I can’t...” Her body goes rigid and I note the telling signs of a panic attack: rapid breathing, sweat breaking out across her forehead, and a tremor shakes her whole body.

My training tells me to sit her down, get her water, and let her wait out the panic as I help her focus on her surroundings, what is real.

But I *know* Juliana, and after our time with Griffin, I understand exactly what she really needs. She needs to stop thinking. She needs to give in and let go.

“Darling, you need to take a moment to relax,” I murmur as I cup her face, and my decision is made without hesitation. “God. I never thought I would be one of these people... come with me.”

I do not want the others crowding her right now. She needs a moment alone to breathe and come back down from her mounting panic. My only thought is to take her to the on-call room and give her exactly that. Right now, she is spiraling through every worst-case scenario she can think of. She is overthinking, and I want her mindless with pleasure instead.

I feel her tug back a little again as I pull her into the empty on-call room across the hall.

“Sage.”

The door swings shut behind us.

“Shhh,” I whisper as I turn to back her towards the door and immediately reach to cup her face once again. “You are

thinking too much. You're overwhelmed and on edge."

"Sage. I can't leave him." Her breath is shallow, and there are tears forming in her eyes.

"Darling, we have all the time in the world. Nothing is going to happen to him while we are here."

"Sage," she groans.

"No. You need this. Let me care for you," I plead.

She is pressed between me and the door, and at my words she arches forward instinctively into my body. I can feel her nipples hardening beneath her cotton dress despite her distress. I reach for her hip with one hand and my other moves from her cheek to grasp her by the root of her hair.

"You are going to be a good girl for me, aren't you?" I whisper, tilting her head back as I trace her jaw with my lips.

My hand moves from her hip, across her round stomach, and down beneath her dress. I grasp her cunt possessively, and she has a sharp intake of breath.

I love the way she responds to me. How quickly I can feel she has become wet for me underneath the lace covering her pussy. I am rubbing back and forth along her crease, causing her breath to pick up. My teeth scrape along her jawline and her head tilts back, opening to me for more.

"Tell me. Tell me what you want." It is on the tip of her tongue. I feel her hesitation, so I push. "Tell me what you want, darling. Or I stop right now."

Since the fire, we have noticed the rage she tries to hide under exhaustion, but right now that raging fire is replaced by a lustful flame.

For me.

For this.

I see when she makes her choice, when she decides how she will go on. I'm honored to witness how she resolves herself to take what is hers, both here and outside of these walls.

"Touch me. Fuck me," she pants. "Please, I need it."

"Need what?" I ask.

"You. I need you, Sage," she gasps, pushing her pussy into my hand.

"That's my darling. Good girl." I place a kiss on the center of her forehead.

Not moving my hand at the center of her pleasure, I let go of her hair to reach and push the bodice of her dress down. Unconfined by a bra, her breasts are full and they fall heavily out of her dress with a bounce. Taking her in hand, I caress and squeeze the fullness. She pushes firmly into my palm with a silent question, and I respond with a flick to her nipple.

Her moan sends a thrill through me, stirring my own arousal.

Then I kiss her, not to silence her but to take in the sound of her pleasure. But when I pull away, she grasps me by the face, trying to pull me back into the kiss.

“No,” I state as I twist her nipple tightly.

“Please.” She pants through the pain.

“No. Because if you are kissing me, then I cannot hear how you respond to my touch. I want to hear you moan and cry for me. I want to hear how wet you are for me as my fingers fuck you into oblivion.”

“Fuck,” she breathes, dropping her head back against the door.

“Lock it,” I instruct, and she scrambles to reach over and turn the bolt on the door.

“Good girl.” My praise is thick with my own lust as I continue to pluck at her nipple. “Now, you are going to take my fingers like a good little slut, aren’t you darling?”

She lets out a small whimper as her legs widen instinctively, and I push her panties to the side to run my fingers through her wetness. I caress her slowly, tracing every piece of her.

“You are so wet for me, darling.”

“Yes,” she gasps as I flick her clit.

I press firmly against that most sensitive place, sending a shiver through her body. She is so responsive to my touch, yet a strong immovable force at the same time. Every sign of her pleasure, her release of control, makes pride swell in my chest. She’s worthy of happiness but the world is cruel. So much has been taken from her, and the inevitable ending to this story can’t be pretty, but moments like this, watching her come apart, are beautiful.

Her whimpers turn into whines as I deny her, only moving my fingers up and down her folds. She is shaking in anticipation of my touch, waiting to be filled by my fingers.

“Do you want me, darling?” I tease. “Do you want me to fuck you with my fingers until you collapse with exhaustion?”

I grasp her cunt firmly on my last words, and she lets out a moan that reverberates in my own core. I’m burning inside and I want her nearly as much as she needs me.

But first, I want to see her come apart at my hands.

“Please, ma’am,” she bites out.

“Oh, you tease, do you not, my darling?” I laugh. “You really know how to make a woman feel special. I like hearing you call me ma’am.”

Without warning I thrust two fingers into her. She collapses into me and cries out my name. Her grip on me is firm as I start to press in and out of her. When I find her most sensitive spot she buries her face into my shoulder, biting down to contain her reckless sounds.

I stroke firm and slow against her walls, and my thumb comes to play again with her clit.

I play her body like a game, changing up my tactic each time I feel her tension rise too much.

She’s so close to the edge and she is begging me to let her come.

“Yes, Ma’am. Please,” she whines. “Please, please, please, please, please.”

“Please, what, my darling?” I taunt.

“Please let me come, ma’am. I need it. So much,” she begs.

I press my palm firmly into her clit as my fingers dive deeper inside of her, stroking firm and fast right where she needs it. Her body shakes as she mounts her peak.

“Come for me, darling. Come undone for me.” My voice has a growl in it I have never used before, and Juliana’s response is visceral.

Everything in her body goes tight and then she is falling over the edge of her own pleasure. Her orgasm overtakes her, breaths coming fast and body going limp. Pressing forward fully into my embrace, I slowly pull my fingers out and move to continue to play with her clit and bring her down softly back to me where we stand.

Panting breaths turn steady, and her trembling stills into the occasional shiver. Her body goes as soft as her voice.

“My turn.” I can barely hear the words through her breathless panting. But then she is sinking to her knees before me.

“Darling, we don’t have time.”

“No. You said we have all the time in the world,” she says tauntingly. “Please, I need this.”

I feel when the dam holding back my own desire breaks. I grasp her by the chin and force her gaze up toward my own from where she kneels before me looking like a satiated angel.

“Tell me,” I whisper. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want to taste you,” she says without hesitation.

Words are useless against the look she gives me. My only option for response is to nod permission.

I could never deny this woman anything.

I give her a little show as I slowly draw the waistband of my scrubs and underwear down my body, teasing her with my slow movements as I strip for her while taking the few steps toward the bed against the wall of the small room.

She is breathing hard as I move, prowling after me like a cat stalking its prey.

When my knees back up against the edge of the bed, I drop back as my scrubs fall to the ground. Constricted by the fabric cuffs of my clothes around my ankles, I am trapped in place. Juliana positions herself between my open knees and runs her hands up my sides to my hips. They rest there reverently for a moment before she leans in to bury herself at my center.

Her breath skims over my sensitive skin, and my head drops back in pleasure.

After drawing away, she starts with light kisses at the inside of my knee, pushing them further apart as she goes. Moving her way up my inner thigh, her kisses turn into long caresses of her tongue.

My hand reaches out to run through the strands of her hair, and I pull her close. Without thought to what I am doing, my fingers grasp her firmly by the root and she lets out a barely contained moan.

Every nerve in my body tingles in anticipation of her touch.

I let myself melt a little into the warmth of her between my thighs. My arms keep me above the bed so I can see her and I'm weighing heavily on her shoulders now, but she doesn't seem to mind. The heat of her body burns against my own skin as she approaches the place where I need her most.

My weight shifts more heavily onto her, and she takes it as encouragement to continue to nibble up my body, now caressing my ass that hangs off the bed and searching for every dip and crevice.

I adore how she seems to treasure my body.

Nibbles turn into bites and soft caresses into a hard grasp which brings forth a small sigh from my lips. Reaching her destination, I look down at her again, giving her further permission. My right hand moves from the root of her hair down to her cheek. Before she can lean into my touch, I move it to the nape of her neck.

In a second, her mouth is on me. I shudder with pleasure. Up and down, she licks me. Swirling her tongue at my center, moving to kiss my outer folds before burying herself in me. She stays there for a long time, drinking in my essence, and I worry about her growing lightheaded. Her need for oxygen

seems to be abandoned in favor of her need for me, the battle violently won out by desire for our connection.

Reluctantly, I force her back a little, and the sensation of her tongue and touch dies down. She is gasping for air a little, and underneath her state of breathlessness I hear a small whimper.

While she searches for air, I take her hand and bring it to my clit. She watches me attentively as I guide her fingers into my wetness, making her witness how I use her body to find the caress I desire.

The strokes are slow at first until impatience takes over. Her other hand skims up my thigh and reaches for the softness of my stomach. Noticing my sudden tension, she immediately seeks to rid me of the feeling by placing tender kisses there. All the while, I continue to guide her fingers to stroke me in the way I have shown her. I need her.

She moves her fingers to build my pleasure by circling my clit. But she cannot stop kissing my round stomach—the scars and stretch marks left by childbirth, by Kieran.

I am pulled from the moment at the reminder of my son and emotion overwhelms. Guilt starts to creep into this small moment of pleasure and my breath hitches. She cannot stop kissing my soft stomach, though, and I focus on that. I close my eyes and sink into the feeling.

Then and only then does she thrust her fingers into me. I gasp at the entrance, and Juliana growls hungrily at the moans I am struggling to suppress. As she navigates my body expertly, her knees give out, and she settles herself fully

underneath me, her neck craned back, mouth seeking me still. She laps at me, sucks and teases, all while stroking me with increasing pressure, her fingers and tongue working in tandem.

Her hands move automatically, drawing in and out beautifully. She is persistent and eager to bring my downfall. The smallest of quivers start, and I press more deeply into her tongue, groaning as my hips involuntarily rock against her. She's fully enraptured now, having me nearly on the brink. She continues to probe me, and when she crosses her fingers inside of me to press at my g-spot, I feel the swell of satisfaction I so desperately seek.

I have found my peak of pleasure.

I begin to pull away, but Juliana pulls me closer. I am shaking and convulsing, all control and command of the situation now gone as I succumb to the feeling.

I'm overwhelmed, but she keeps going, her efforts redoubled.

She leads me through one orgasm after another, though there's really no point in counting. All the while, I writhe and beg to her until, finally, she guides me down from the throes of passion and pleasure.

I collapse against the bed when the overwhelming sensations finally abate and Juliana crawls up to wrap herself around me.

We stay there for an eternity as our breaths slow and the world begins to settle around us. I slide closer to her, wrapping

my arms delicately around Juliana's shoulder and leaning all of my weight against her. She holds me firmly and runs her hands up and down my spine, stroking with a tenderness we both desperately need.

We lay there, both in disarray, together. Each of us trying to catch our breath.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"What for, darling?"

"For this." She pauses. "For knowing me better than I know myself."

Little does she know... the light of life reflects off of her even in the darkness.

Wanna Be Missed

sage

My routine is simple: up before dawn and down after sunset to get a little rest before the cycle starts over.

Sometimes I just skip the sleep part altogether.

It's been nearly two weeks since the fire at Bliss and today I saw off the last of the girls from the club, leaving only Stacy in the ICU, who appears to be on the mend. Early on, we put her on ventilation to ease the strain on her body, and her vitals stabilized shortly after. Her burns are responding well to treatment, and overall, we have been able to keep her comfortable. Despite everyone's progress, and as much as I trust the team supervising her care, I cannot help but feel a sense of responsibility for these girls.

They are Juliana's family, so they have become mine.

The only thing for me to do right now is make sure everyone is well, or at least as well as they can be. The others who suffered more minor burns and smoke inhalation from the fire have come back for checkups. Physically, they are on the mend but mentally some seem to be breaking down. Anger is

the primary emotion for some, while others are cowering in the face of everything.

This isn't what I would want for them. It is not what Juliana would want for them.

"Sage!" Juliana exclaims, jumping up from her chair beside a still sleeping Jay as I enter his room. "The doctor said they're going to start weaning him off the meds. We'll be able to go home soon."

There is a light in her eyes that has not been present as of late, and her eagerness is adorable. Blonde hairs fall out of her haphazard bun, making her look sweet and innocent, and her smile is contagious.

"That's good to hear, darling." I lean forward to place a kiss on her forehead, and I feel her melt into me. "Did they tell you when they were going to start reducing the dosages?"

"They already did," Ember chimes in from across the room.

"Oh. Thank you."

I hadn't noticed they were there—far too focused on the woman before me—but it makes sense. None of us have been able to stray far from her the past week, and she has been with Jay. So that is where we all are as well.

Except Griffin, who is... well, we don't know.

A groan comes from Jay's bed.

"Jay?" I ask softly as I cross to him, pulling Juliana alongside me.

Jay shifts as he starts to awaken, testing his limitations.

“Jay, sweetie. We need you to wake up, okay? Can you do that for me?” I murmur, knowing he is not going to be fully with us.

“Mmmm,” he groans, reaching for the wound on his abdomen.

“Okay. That’s progress, right?” Juliana asks from beside me.

Noticing how Jay seems to lean into the sound of her voice, I pull her closer. “Talk to him. That will help.”

“Jay?” Juliana asks.

Jay groans once more and his eyes flutter with effort.

“Jay? Can you open your eyes?”

And as though he was waiting for her instructions, he opens them to find her face. “Julia?”

“Oh thank goddess.” Immediately Juliana is on him and a third groan—pained this time—escapes his lips as she falls on him. “Shit. Sorry. Sorry, sorry,” she apologizes nervously, her hands going to rest on either side of Jay’s face as his eyes close again.

“Mhmm.”

“Anytime now,” a deeper voice mocks from across the room.

“Cy?” Jay asks, and Cy grunts in reply.

“Cy, please,” Juliana scolds.

I can see the evidence of strain on Jay's face, but the effort he is making for Juliana is admirable.

"Hey," Juliana purrs as he opens his eyes.

I watch on, enraptured by the quiet moment passing between the two.

"We are going to go outside for a minute. Okay, darling?" I offer to Juliana.

"Okay, thank you." Juliana is smiling but she looks simultaneously haunted. Her eyes sparkle with unshed tears, and evidence of the stress of the past weeks is worn on her face.

Turning to Ember and Cy, I motion for them to follow me out of the room.

The hallway outside Jay's room is bustling with people in brightly colored uniforms, making us all look out of place in our dark clothes. Nurses fly by with trays of supplies and paperwork. Doctors converse back and forth about the cases they're working on, but I keep my ear to Jay's room.

"What do you mean Bliss is gone?" Jay asks.

I turn my attention back to Ember and Cy who are waiting patiently.

"Have you figured anything else out regarding Kieran?" I ask Ember.

"I'm sorry, Sage. It's just taking longer than any of us expected. And with Griffin..." they trail off.

“Where the fuck is that kid, anyway?” Cy interrupts.

It is the question circling my thoughts since the night of the fire. Where on earth has Griffin disappeared to? It’s been almost two weeks since we’ve seen or heard anything of him. We tried calling the station to see if he reported in, but they said he’s been AWOL since his last check-in with his handler over a month ago, long before we left him at the fire.

“Let us... Why don’t we grab food for everyone?” I suggest and turn toward the elevator bay.

My desperate need for control forces my thoughts on repeat as we ride down to the first floor. I keep grasping for control, but this situation is beyond my capability. I cannot create order out of thin air, and right now, that is all that is left.

We don’t know where Griffin is, though he is the one person who could really help us retrieve Kieran. We do not know who shot Jay, or who tried to burn down Bliss, though it stands to reason they are one and the same. We don’t have answers to much and it’s wearing on me, on us.

Exiting the elevator, I let my thoughts wander as we stroll down the hall. Ember has their hand placed protectively on the small of my back and I appreciate the comfort they lend.

As we turn the corner into the main lobby, I spot a familiar head of chestnut brown hair. They have a backpack slung across their shoulder and are talking to one of the nurses at the front desk.

“Am I...”

“Hallucinating? No,” Cy growls as he stomps forward.

Before Cy can reach the man, I call out, “Griffin?”

His head whips around to me, revealing Griffin’s bright smile. He looks as exhausted as the rest of us, with deep circles under his usually bright ocher eyes. Uneven patches of scruff have overtaken his normally smooth jawline and give him a disheveled look.

“Oh, thank goddess, Sage.”

“Griffin, where have you been?” I start, but before he can respond, Cy has him by the collar and drags him outside. I do not need to glance at Ember to know we should follow.

Outside, Cy tosses Griffin onto a nearby bench and stands before him, glaring. “Report,” he commands.

“I don’t fucking report to you, Cy. I don’t report to any-fucking-one,” Griffin snaps, all of his soft charm disappearing for a moment. It reminds me all too much of the Griffin I once knew who stood at Arrick’s side. Hesitantly, his tattooed hands come up to grasp the base of his neck as he seems to ponder his answer.

“Griffin,” I start slowly, Ember and Cy’s presences providing a comfortable safety net. “You disappeared on us. Juliana has been worried sick. So, tell me. Where have you been?”

“I’m sorry,” he begins. “I had to take care of something.”

“So you took off with no warning?” I barely have the patience to let him continue. “Griffin, what on earth could be

so important that you would abandon us?”

It takes him a moment to gather himself enough to answer.

“Kieran.”

At that, my heart melts and my eyes fill with tears.

“Kieran,” I repeat.

“Yeah, I had to see if I could learn anything about what Arrick is up to. I wanted to see if I could find out about Kieran.”

The world sways a bit and my heart clenches at the thought of my son. How alone and scared he must be. I have pushed thoughts of him aside for the sake of survival, trusting Ember will do everything they can to find him. But the reminder of what I have lost is too much.

“And what did you find?”

He sighs. “Nothing, unfortunately.”

“Right. Of course,” Cy snarks. “Runs off and comes home with nothin’. If you’re gonna come back, you might as well bring something useful to the table.”

“I did, though! Well....” The look on his face is curious. Like he doesn’t know how to proceed or how to prepare for our reactions. “I learned a lot. Just not about Kieran. I’m sorry.”

Ember nods silently beside me.

“Where are the others?” he asks.

“Inside,” Ember says quietly.

“How... How is she?”

“Oh. You’re on your own with that one,” Cy jokes, resuming his slightly more casual stance. “She has been a mix of emotions since the fire. She’ll either put you on cloud nine or you’re gonna be on death row when she sees you.”

I offer my hand to him and he takes it to stand up, but I do not let go when he pulls back. The look he gives me is heartbreaking, like he thought he wouldn’t be wanted anymore.

We make our way through the halls back to Jay’s room, but before we reach the entrance, I turn back to Griffin. “You need to tell them. You know, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” he replies.

Everything seems normal when I enter behind Cy and Ember, but the second Griffin walks into the room, Jay and Juliana go still.

Jay is the first to respond. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“Jay!” Juliana scolds.

“What? You’re gonna tell me you don’t wanna know? You aren’t pissed at him for disappearing? You literally just told me he’s been gone for like two weeks with no word.” His words are still a little slurred, but his eyes are bright with energy.

“Jay, please,” I implore.

“Nah. You want to give him the benefit of the doubt, fine. But he’s been missing with no word, all the while y’all have been freaking out and I’ve been unconscious. The *fuck* is wrong with you, man,” he says, pointing one finger at Griffin.

“Jay,” Juliana interjects coolly as she crosses her arms defensively and gives Griffin a little lift of her chin, “why don’t we let him explain.”

I have moved to Ember’s side, but Griffin remains in the doorway with his bag slung over his shoulder. Everyone is looking to him for some explanation.

“Griffin, you have to say something,” I prompt.

“Oh, right... ” he mumbles. A thought seems to suddenly occur to him and he rummages through the backpack on his shoulder only to draw out a small container. “I brought cookies.”

And just like that, all the tension in the room disappears.

“Well, fuck man. Bring that over here then.” Jay smiles, everything forgiven and Griffin eagerly approaches his bed.

“Jay! Didn’t you listen to the doctors? You’re supposed to be eating healthy and all that,” Juliana scolds.

“Yeah, but one cookie isn’t going to kill me... Or a few,” he mumbles between bites of gooey chocolate.

I cannot help but smile, how the banter so easily returns between them.

When we left them earlier, Juliana was distraught and on the edge of something dangerous. The way she desperately clung to Jay's hand over the past few weeks will forever be emblazoned on my memory. But truly, it is the resilience she somehow maintains that is most frightening of all. Not simply an ability to rebound. Somehow, her version is more destructive. With each time she is knocked down, broken, and destroyed, she seems to rise up stronger and more powerful than before.

In this moment, with all of us gathered, there is joy in her face, but her eyes tell a different story.

"They're not gluten free. Or homemade. They're just the freezer cookie dough I had. Sorry." Griffin rambles as Jay bites into a second cookie.

"Nah, man. Sugar is sugar."

And Griffin smiles, but I notice how he won't meet Juliana's gaze.

"Griffin," I prompt. "Tell them."

"Um... yeah, right." For all the charm this man possesses, sometimes he manages to fumble in the most adorable way. "Arrick is out for blood."

But that's not a fumble.

Eyes around the room go wide and Jay stops with his cookie halfway to his mouth. All the joking energy of seconds ago is gone, and everyone focuses in on the one man in the room with answers.

“You’re going to need to be clearer,” Cy prompts. “Who’s blood? Exactly.”

And that’s the problem, isn’t it?

Griffin looks back to Juliana and me, silently begging us to say the words we all know, though we do not want to admit it.

“Last I heard, there are bodies piling up. Thirteen so far, but I’m sure that’s changed since I last heard,” he says, stalling like his life depends on it. “Quinn’s exact words were ‘the fuckers on a rampage,’ and I don’t think he’s stopping anytime soon.”

“Griffin, do you know what he wants?” I ask.

“You. He wants you. And Juliana. Best my friend was able to gather is that’s why he took Kieran.”

My heart seizes.

It’s my fault my little boy is in danger. I should have been there to protect him.

“So what? Does he think we’ll just storm in to go get the kid? Put them directly in his path?” Cy interjects before I have the chance to respond.

“Isn’t that what we are going to do?” I snap. “We are going to get him, right?”

“Fuck yeah we’re gonna get the little guy. But it’s a shit idea just to go in guns blazing,” Cy responds.

“Sage, you said it yourself. Arrick wouldn’t *hurt* Kieran. There’s no rush right now,” Ember says, trying to sooth my

rising temper, one I haven't seen in a while. "We need a plan to safely take out Arrick. *Then* we get Kieran back."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" My voice is raising. "I have waited for weeks and you have nothing. I put everything aside to care for you all. To take care of your people. To keep this family together. This is my *son* and you are telling me the best we can do is just *wait*?" My chest is tight and my pulse is racing. I have never had a panic attack before, but this must be one, right? My mouth goes dry, and the room tilts as I try to suck in air.

At that, no one will look me in the eye. No one except for Juliana.

"He is my person. Kieran is my person," I cry. "And no one is helping him. I cannot help him. And he's all alone."

Her eyes are sympathetic, and she looks sad, for me.

"I trusted you with this." Tears stream openly down my face. "I trusted you with my everything. My whole world."

Upon her approach, she brings her hand to cup my jaw. Her crystalline gaze draws me in and a sense of comfort comes to temper my spiraling anger. Everything about her is relaxed right now, and I start to relax with her as we breathe together.

I almost pull back when she leans in to lightly kiss me on the lips, but as she opens for me, I melt into her body. She wraps herself around me and my hand goes to grip her at the back of her neck, pulling her closer. We are losing ourselves in the moment and slowly the world seems to fade away.

We stay like this for a while, devouring each other more fervently now before a cough draws us out of the moment.

I look up and study the room, expecting scowling faces of jealousy, but no one seems phased. Griffin is grinning ear to ear, and Jay has a knowing smirk plastered across his face. Even Cy looks less neutral. But it's Ember who surprises me by seemingly retreating into themselves in regret.

Juliana's focus has not drifted away from me, and when I come back to her something settles in me. I know we will figure this out, together.

“Sorry. That was...”

“Understandable. Expected, even. You've been so strong for all of us, Sage. You carried us through. Let us take over,” Juliana murmurs before placing a kiss on my cheek. “We're not giving up on him. He's your son. If you want us to go after him right now, then we will.”

And I believe her. “But.”

“But Cy and Ember know what they're talking about and if they say we should come up with a plan first, then I think we should listen.”

Her words are only for me, and they bring tears back to my eyes. It is the first time I have allowed myself to really feel the pain of losing Kieran. Tears stream down my face and I fall into Juliana's arms. My head drops to her shoulder as I cry, and she rubs comforting circles into my back.

“You’re allowed to miss him, Sage. You’re allowed to feel however you need to feel. We’re going to bring him home. I promise.”

Silence fills the room as I cry, as I grieve. Someone comes up behind me and I soak in their embrace. A hand comes to hold my own and I’m blanketed in the comfort of the others.

“You’re going to be okay,” Juliana whispers as my tears slow.

“Thank you.” I pick my head up and see Jay leaning forward in his bed and Cy is standing closer than before. I can tell it is Griffin at my back now and Ember holds my hand.

And I know I am not alone.

I have abandoned any hope I used to have of my picture-perfect family.

Because this is what real family looks like.

Hateful

GRIFFIN

They told me that for the full two weeks I was gone, Juliana refused to leave Jay's side. It's been two days since I rejoined everyone, and the evidence of her sacrifice couldn't be clearer.

She looks thinner than she was a couple of weeks ago. Her hair has lost some of its shine and her skin has taken on a faded tint. It's eerily similar to when I first met her, only this time the person she needs rescuing from is herself.

There are circles under Jules' eyes mirroring my own, too. But I've been gathering as much information as possible to bring back too while she's been here with the others.

While I know not all is forgiven, everyone seems to have eased into a sort of routine with me back. Cy has been doing his best to mother everyone, coming up to the hospital with food and clothes, while Ember stayed at home trying to get eyes on Kieran. I gave them everything I know about the security systems and protocols at Mathieson Enterprises, but it doesn't feel like enough.

I'm worried about Sage mostly. The vulnerability she showed us a few days ago brought her closer to us all. But since then, she's been pulling away, lost in her own world and yet still attentive to everyone's needs.

Me, on the other hand, I feel useless. I've done everything I can to help, but as the days pass, it feels less and less impactful.

My phone chimes.

8:09 a.m. Quinn: Another day, another body.

Shit.

That's sixteen.

8:10 a.m. Quinn: Kid was 19.

Fuck.

Tucking my phone back into my pocket, I open the door to Jay's room—we're all on shifts now, watching over the Jay and Juliana. We're all worried about her. Though, since my arrival, Jay appears to be more annoyed with the hovering than anything.

According to Sage, the doctors are going to release him today, and everyone came up to the hospital to help move him back to the firehouse.

I walk into Jay's room to find Juliana asleep at his side again, her hand tightly gripping his. He looks up from his book when I enter and relief seems to flood him.

"Hey," Jay says.

“Hey,” I reply softly.

“Any chance one of those coffees is for me?” he whisper yells.

“Sorry, dude. Doc said no caffeine, but I got you a hot chocolate.”

“Good enough for me. Thanks.” He looks down at Juliana and lets out a sigh. “It’s good we’re all going home. We needed to get her out of here a long time ago. It’s not good for her to be here.”

“Probably. But I don’t know if you’ve noticed, she’s kind of stubborn, and I don’t think anyone could pry her off you with everything that happened. Not without someone taking some damage.” I chuckle.

“She needs rest, not just sleep. Real rest.” His gaze travels back to me and I see the worry living there. Even recovering from a gunshot wound won’t stop this man from loving her.

And it is love.

They love each other.

A twinge of jealousy, followed by guilt, runs through me at the thought.

I know Juliana cares about me, but how much, I’m not sure. I should ask, but it seems pointless with everything going on. My feelings for her aren’t the priority right now. Plus, I’m pretty sure disappearing for two weeks doesn’t help my case, even if it was for the right reasons.

“Should I try to wake her?” I ask. “The others should be coming back with the doctor to release you soon.”

“Nah. Just leave her for now,” he says with stars in his eyes.

I walk over and place Jay’s hot chocolate within his reach, setting the others nearby on the table beside his bed.

Sitting in the chair on the other side of Jay’s bed across from Juliana, I study her. How her hair splays over the blankets and how her full lips part ever so slightly as she breathes in and out. Memories of the first time I saw Julia float through my mind. Of how badly I wanted to know this woman. Of how desperate I was to mean something to her. To be her forever person.

Jay catches me watching her and smirks. “I know how you feel.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. She gets under your skin.” He gets a particular look on his face. Like he has something important to share. “They say marriage is the biggest commitment you will ever make. It’s for better or worse. But with her it feels like that starts from the moment you meet her. You know?”

I stare at him in disbelief.

“The ‘till death do us part’ thing seems to be coming on a little strong recently, though,” I mock, which has Jay laughing. “No, but seriously. How fucked up is all of this?”

“How is any of this news to you?” he asks. “The world is not a kind place. You have to fight for the good things when

they come along.”

“Like her?” I nod toward the woman in question.

“Exactly like her.” He seems lost in thought as his attention is drawn back to Juliana, and he runs his free hand through her hair.

I sit with them in silence until Jay relaxes back, slumped in her direction, his hand still wrapped in hers as his breathing slows. They look so peaceful as they lay together.

Restless, I head out into the hallway to the nurse’s station to look for Sage. For anyone to give me something to do.

“Excuse me.” I interject to get a nurse’s attention. “Do you know where Sage is?”

She looks at me confused.

“Sorry. Dr. Mathieson?”

“Oh. She went downstairs a little while ago with two others. To the cafe, I think?” the nurse shares.

“Black man and his Asian partner?”

“Yes. Exactly.” She smiles.

“Okay. Thank you. I’ll head down there then.”

I turn to head towards the elevator when something catches my eye—a man in black scrubs. He’s headed down the hallway with a slight limp in his gait.

I’m on high alert as he gets closer to the doorway, my feet moving automatically to confront the threat.

Because he is a threat.

Only Jay's room is the only one at the end of the hall.

He glances behind and I recognize the man as Kutter Monroe, my former second in command of Arrick's security team. He hasn't spotted me yet—blockhead—but he's too far away for me to grab him.

The second he passes through the doorway, I'm running. People move out of my way as I move and I reach the door quickly, though not quick enough.

He's only a foot away from Juliana, pulling a gun out of the waistband of his pants and placing it inches away from her temple.

"Kutter!" I yell. "Put it down."

Jay jolts awake and his eyes go wide at the sight of Kutter's gun.

I'm wholly focused on Kutter and the gun he has aimed at Juliana's head.

"Julia. Julia, you need to wake up now," Jay says, and from afar, I can see how tightly he's squeezing her hand.

"Griffin?" Juliana yawns. Realization dawns across her crystalline eyes, and she freezes under the barrel of the gun.

"Kutter. Put. The fucking. Gun. Down," I say. I don't take my attention off the man in front of me.

"I can't," he grinds out, tears streaming down his face.

"Why the fuck not, man?" I ask.

“You fuckin’ tell me, *man!*” he shouts, drawing the attention of people in the hall. “Where the fuck did you go? What the fuck are you doin’ with these people?”

With each word he utters, I’m moving closer to him, but he’s too worked up to notice. There’s a terror in his glistening eyes I’ve seen far too many times. Fear only Arrick seems to instill in people.

Arrick threatens like no man I’ve ever known.

“What did he threaten?”

“Why the hell would I tell you, you traitor?” he snaps, circling to face me.

“Whatever he said to you is probably a lie. You know that, right?” I reply calmly

“Doesn’t matter. He wants the bitch dead,” he says, hand shaking slightly.

My mind runs through the few negotiation trainings we had back in the academy, but I can’t remember any of the ridiculous acronyms. So, we’re flying by the seat of our pants.

“I can’t let you do that, man.”

“Mr. Mathieson gave his warning, and he wants what’s his,” Kutter rambles. His gaze is unfocused, and the lights seem to be messing with him.

Juliana starts to stand but I shake my head, trying to tell her to stand down. I wait for the slight stumble to come as he takes

his next limping step and I move forward, reaching for his gun and forcing his wrist up toward the ceiling until he lets go.

With his back to Juliana, he doesn't see when she raises a tray above her head and brings it down swiftly on his own with a thud, further disorienting him and sending him to the ground.

"Nice!" Jay exclaims.

"Fuck," I murmur, removing the gun's cartridge.

"Shit," Cy adds from behind me. I whirl around to see the trio of Cy, Ember, and Sage standing in the doorway. "What'd we miss?"

Ember is staring with their mouth open, but it's Sage who keeps things moving. "I'll be back," she states. When she returns moments later with a syringe in her hand, I'm almost shocked.

"Are we drugging him?" I ask. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins.

I've been told matters of life and death can occur within seconds, but it's like my whole existence, past and future, flashed before me in the few moments Kutter had a gun to Juliana's head.

"Well, yes. What else are we supposed to do?" Sage supplies.

"Then what?" I ask, shocked.

“Take him with us. Throw him in the red room at home,” Ember offers.

“There’s a red room at the firehouse?” I don’t know what a red room is, but it doesn’t sound super pleasant.

“Oh, hell yes.” Jay is grinning at that. “Just put him in my wheelchair and we can roll him out of here.”

Kutter slumps further on the ground, Jules still standing above him with the tray in her shaking hands. Sage takes it out of her grasp as she rises from the floor.

“Who is he?” Sage inquires.

“One of Arrick’s men,” I share. “He was my second.”

“Shit,” Cy breathes.

“So, we’re taking him home?” Jules asks, slowly catching up with the rest of the conversation. “What do we do with him then?”

“TBT,” Jay says with a shit-eating grin on his face. We all stare at him confused. “To be tortured.”

“What the fuck, man? That’s sick.” Cy cackles, a huge smile on his face.

“What? Clearly he knows stuff we need to know. Might as well take the advantage while we have him,” Jay clarifies, his expression dead serious. “Plus, I’m like ninety percent sure this is the guy who shot me.”

“Oh, now he’s super fucked.” Ember smirks.

“Okay. The seven of us then. We’re going home,” I prompt.

The room goes quiet as our attention all draws to Juliana, who's gone quiet.

"You good, babe?" I ask hesitantly.

"Don't fucking call me babe." Her breathing grows rapid as she rushes out the words.

"Juliana?" Sage asks, approaching her cautiously.

Her face changes from being tight with anger to blank with fear. The events of the past months seem to pass across her eyes in a moment as she places a tremendous blame on herself.

"I can't do this," she mutters as she collapses back into the chair behind her.

Jay looks over at me with murder in his eyes.

"Can't do what, darling?" Sage continues.

"I can't do it. I can't go back. He... He..." Juliana is gasping for breath.

"We know, darling," Sage reassures. "Just breathe. We know."

Minutes pass in silence as Juliana breathes, trying to calm herself.

"I can't do it by myself," she finally says when she's collected herself.

"Baby, you don't have to," Jay says, threading his fingers through her own.

Drawn to her, I make my way to where she sits and kneel beside her at her feet. Taking her other hand in my own, I look

up into the glittering eyes I've fallen for. She looks to be on the brink of tears, but also as if she's angry at the thought of crying.

“What do you need, Jules?” I repeat the words from our first encounter. “Tell us what we can do.”

“I want all of it. I want his family, and his business.” She's growing bolder as she speaks, and I see the moment when everything settles in her again. “I want his empire. I want his life.”

Heavy Hearts

JULIANA

No one speaks after my announcement.

I basically admitted to wanting to commit murder, and no one said anything. No one tried to contradict me or clarify. There was just complete understanding from the room, including Sage.

I would have expected some kind of reaction to my threat from her, but the cool look she had on was more in agreement than anything. She's trying to puzzle out what's best for everyone, but doesn't yet see that the solution is what's right for all of us. She seems to be caught between wanting what is best for Kieran and us, but she doesn't yet see the best path forward is what's best for everyone.

Including Arrick's death.

Were it not for the fire, I would have heard myself in that room and laughed. The idea I could harm someone in that way would have been near impossible to imagine. But having someone intentionally seek you out and attack you like Arrick did, brings out a new side to things.

And I'm not going back now.

Cy is given the honor of dragging me home while Sage and Ember try to speed up Jay's release process. I didn't want to leave without him, but we needed to take our new friend back to the firehouse before anyone became suspicious. Collectively, they all took this as an opportunity to push me to leave as well.

Griffin helped load Kutter into the back of Cy's truck, and we all sat in silence on our way home.

Griffin seems to be a mix of emotions right now. The shock of seeing his friend—former friend—aim a gun at me hasn't seemed to settle yet. He keeps glancing back every few moments to check on me in the back seat. The look he gives me each time says he's checking to make sure I haven't fallen apart again, frozen again. But I'm done falling apart, of feeling broken.

Everything Arrick Mathieson put me through is brutal and cruel. There is no beauty, no silver lining, to come from all of this. And I've accepted that. I've accepted that the only path is forward and there's no point in reliving past experiences.

Instead, I'll let them fuel me. Fuel the desire for revenge.

With such a silent car ride back to the firehouse, I'm not expecting Cy to stop me just as I reach the stairwell.

"Meet me in the gym." His hand rests on my shoulder, and the warmth of his touch radiates through my whole body.

“I’m not dressed...” I say, looking down at my simple button up, skirt, and boots.

“I’m going to help ti chen with this, but meet me. Please.” There’s such tenderness in his expression and I know I’ll obey. He reaches to nudge my face to meet his own with a finger under my chin.

“Okay,” I breathe.

Gazing into Cy’s dark eyes is like being wrapped in thick blankets next to a fire in the middle of a freeze. The whole world stands still for a moment. The only thing that exists is the delicate connection between us.

“Okay.” He sighs before placing a soft kiss on my forehead.

Griffin gives Cy a peculiar look when he leaves me but says nothing about our moment. He does, however, give me a wide grin.

I watch them for a second as they drag the unconscious man from the truck bed before turning to head to the gym.

It feels like an eternity of me just wandering the gym, inspecting everything in sight, before Cy joins me. I’ve spent so much time here with him. Every piece of worn equipment reminds me of moments with him, all of which I’m seeing through a new lens now.

He cares.

“Dife mwen,” Cy says from the doorway to the gym.

I turn to face him, but I can't bring myself to move from where I am on the center of the blue mats.

"Cy," I whisper, tears floating on the edges of my vision.

He crosses to me in a matter of seconds and I'm wrapped in his embrace, his face nuzzling the curve of my neck.

"Cy," I prompt.

"Just. Please, let me hold you," he whispers as he pulls me in tighter.

I sigh at the feeling of his hot breath skimming my sensitive flesh and his hard body surrounding my own soft one. I revel in the feeling of how our bodies connect seamlessly. Pieces of our own private puzzle come together as we breathe in unison, the world righting itself once more, until eerie silence overtakes everything.

"Cy, you're scaring me."

At that, he pulls back, cupping my face in his callused hands. "No. Never. I never want that."

"Then explain to me what's going on. Because I'm tired and thoroughly confused."

"Dife mwen..." he begins, pushing his fingers through my hair to grip at the base of my neck. The way he's looking at me is like he's gazing straight into my soul.

"No. Cut it out with the pet names," I say, twisting away from him, my irritation bleeding into the tenderness between

us, ruining the precious moment. “I don’t know what that means, but you don’t get to keep playing with me like this.”

He sighs before collapsing back on the mats beneath us. His forearms rest on his raised knees and his head falls forward. His dark hair has grown out a bit and the usually crisp fade he has appears softer. Everything about him seems softer. I’ve never seen him look so defeated, so vulnerable.

“Cy.” I go to kneel between his feet, my skirt draping around me. “Cy. Talk to me.”

“I met Ember in a war zone.” His words are solemn and there’s a dreamlike quality to them, like he’s remembering something so vividly, it’s real. “I was in the Army, Special Forces. Ember was on a standard transport trip with me and my team when everything went to shit. With absolutely no combat training, they came after me when I was hit by friendly fire.”

My eyes widen as he talks. I’ve never heard him speak about anything so personal.

“I thought they were an angel come to take me home. It was love at first gunshot.” He looks at me then and laughs at the memory. “I left the service for them. They convinced me it was for the best. And it was, ‘course it was. But it wasn’t easy. I didn’t deal with my shit well when I left.”

Something about him seems so fragile. A man so strong and secure shouldn’t be like this, but there’s a part of me thrilled he would show me this kind of vulnerability.

“When we rescued you,” he continues. “When I first brought you up to your room and laid you down in the bed, I thought my whole body was on fire. I was so angry for you, *dife mwen*.” Something swims in his vision at the recollection of our meeting.

“Cy.” I direct his gaze to meet my own with my finger on his chin. “What does that mean, *dife mwen*? Why do you call me that?”

He smirks a knowing smile. “Ember is *lòt mwatye*—the other half of my soul. You, *dife mwen*, are my fire.”

“Cy” I sigh softly.

He opens his arms and I crawl forward to settle within his large, comforting frame. I feel small in his embrace, precious and delicate. Something I haven’t felt in a long time.

His arms wrap around my torso as he rests his chin on my shoulder.

“You were so lost. Like I was, but I saw the same flame in you I once had. The desire for something *more*,” he says emphatically. “You have that now, but still want more. You want Arrick’s pain and suffering? Done. You want him dead, I’ll help you. I have no problem ending that fucker. But you hav’ta promise me somethin’.”

I nod silently, leaning back into Cy’s strength.

“The hospital? That asshole we brought back? Never freeze again.”

“I didn’t...” I say, shifting to face him.

“No. Griffin told me. He saw you freeze when that bastard held a gun to your head. We all watched you panic after.” I cringe at the mention of my brief panic attack. “I don’t care how it happens. You fight. You hear me? Disarm the bastard, break his arm, but don’t *ever* freeze.”

Anger riles in my gut as he speaks. “Cy, I don’t know how else to respond. I’m not used to having guns pointed in my face.” I snap.

“Then we get you used to it. I’ll teach you everythin’ I know. But you fight, you hear me?” His grip tightens around me.

“Yes, sir,” I mock.

Something dark shadows over him and the temperature in the room seems to drop several degrees. His grip on me releases and suddenly I’m being lifted and turned to face him.

“Mesye.” His command sends a chill through me as I settle, straddling him. “You call me mesye.”

My face flushes and my body shivers, briefly brushing my soft center against his harder one.

“Yes, Mesye,” I repeat, breathless.

“Good.” He purrs as he reaches to wrap his hand around my throat possessively.

“Cy.” I’m panting now. “Cy, please. Let go.”

“No,” he snaps. “You want me to stop, you fight me for it.”

Flashes of a delicious scene play across my mind and, involuntarily, I rock against him, letting out a small moan.

“You want that, little girl? You want me to force you, don’t you?”

He says it so matter-of-fact I can’t help but believe him, but his tightening hold on my throat has stopped being a threat. Instead, the way he holds me so possessively has become a comfort.

“The others coddle you. They pleasure you, submit to you, encourage you, but no one takes from you, do they?”

“No.” I’m mindlessly rocking against his hardness.

“You need someone to take from you—force you—don’t you, little girl?” The endearment sends a shiver down my spine and straight to my clit. I’m gasping for breath beneath his hold and with each word he utters, he strokes my newfound arousal.

How did we switch roles so quickly? How did we go from such a vulnerable moment to one strife with sexual tension?

“You still have panic attacks, *dife mwen*,” he confirms.

“Yes.” I cringe at the admission.

“Why.” He’s not asking. He knows exactly why, but he wants me to say it.

“I can’t...” I gasp. “I can’t forget.”

“Do you want to forget, little girl?”

I try to nod but he tightens his grip around my neck to keep me still.

“Use your words.”

“Yes, Mesye. I want to forget.”

“Do you know what you’re asking for, little girl?”

He loosens his grip enough for me to answer with a shake of my head.

“We’re going to play a little game,” he says, pulling a knife from his boot. “Do you want to play, little girl?”

I glance at the knife briefly and nod as he brings the blade beneath my chin.

“Then run.”

Demons

α

She hesitates, taking in my command before scrambling off the floor to take off out of the room.

I stay on the floor, twirling my blade between my fingers as I watch her leave before standing up slowly.

I want to savor this, the hunt.

This isn't the first game I've played with a partner. Ember and I have always had different needs in our relationship. There's a part of me that lives for the chase, and they've understood that. They've never had the same desires as me but have always been supportive. We've each brought new partners into our relationship and found a balance for how we work together.

Ember says I have a sick fascination with control, and this is how I exert it.

I get to play with my prey and when all is said and done, Ember helps me take care of them. Helps me protect them from sub-drop—from themselves.

The way I see it, a dominant is a barrier between a submissive and the world. A windbreaker.

The primal side of me thrives under the knowledge I am the most dangerous threat to my partner. If they're my target, they're mine. Mine to hunt, to chase, to protect.

The beauty of being dominated, of submitting, is that all you have to be is good.

And dife mwen is such a good little girl.

I stand there staring at the door before turning in the opposite direction. As I exit the gym, I make my way through the attached gun range and pass through the armory. I arrive at a closed door and throw it open, revealing the room before me—the playroom.

On the opposite wall stands a large armoire with everything I'll need. I walk over and rummage through it, looking for the items I want for her.

When I locate them, I turn back to the doorway.

Happy hunting.

My movements are slow and methodical as I make my way through the building. I've given her enough of a head start to where she's had plenty of time to run and hide, but I know she hasn't left the building—she would have tripped the alarm the second she opened an external door.

She's here, somewhere.

I've finished checking the whole first floor but have found nothing. Moving to the staircase, I notice a set of boots have been knocked over on the landing.

“Little girl.” I sing. “Where are you?”

Silence surrounds me and I listen for the smallest sounds. I'm searching for the creak of a door, rustling curtains, or heavy breaths.

I'm in the living room when I hear the small snick of a door locking and I whip toward the sound.

“Little girl. Did you really think you could hide from me?”

I know she wants this. She wants the thrill of the hunt just as much as I do.

Adrenaline is coursing through my body. It calms me as it rushes through my bloodstream. Everything in my body is focused on this central goal—find her, hunt her, possess her.

Slow, silent steps take me down the hallway in the direction of the sound. I'm approaching the first bedroom and I try the door, only to have it swing wide open.

I continue to try each door along the hallway, sweeping each room as I go and looking for any sign of my prey. In each room I'm met with more silence.

I reach Sage's room and find the door locked.

Huffing at the ridiculous idea that a simple door could keep her safe, I take one swift kick and the frame splinters, allowing the door to fly open.

As dust settles, I keep silent moving through the room, listening for signs of her. When I reach the raised bed, I notice the smallest shift in shadows on the floor. The tiniest ruffle of the bed skirt confirms my suspicion.

She's under the bed.

I crouch down silently and in one movement, I pull up the fabric of the bed skirt and grasp my prey's ankle. As I drag her out from beneath the bed, she begins to kick and squirm. It takes little effort to pull her fully out from underneath.

“Did you really think you could hide from me, little girl?” I purr.

Shock overtakes me as she gives me a swift kick to the shin, but I quickly recover. She's on all fours only a pace away, and I reach for the collar of her shirt.

Tugging tightly, I bring her up onto her knees. She's flailing, trying to reach my hands and claw her way free from my hold. I step towards her and turn her by the chin to face me.

“Are you going to continue to fight me, *dife mwen*?” I ask.

Her eyes are confused as if she doesn't understand the question. Then, understanding dawns as she remembers the game we're playing.

I ignore the clear signal she gives before her fist makes contact with my ribs, but I don't let go of her. Instead, I grasp her delicate throat and growl out a threat. “Try that again and you'll be getting a lot worse than my fists.”

She continues to claw at me as I force her to bend backward. She's caught between me and the floor, bent uncomfortably to limit her movements. She rakes her nails across my arms but I ignore the sting of pain each pass of her nails cause.

Another desperate swing has me getting down to straddle her by the hips and push her flush with the floor. My grasp moves around her neck and I reach back toward my boot where I stored my knife.

The short blade I withdraw makes her eyes widen. I start to drag it up her arm as I whisper, "I'm going to mark you with this."

She shudders in response and her breath sharpens in anticipation, but she doesn't stop me.

"You want that, don't you, little girl? You want me to mark you as mine."

"Yes," she chokes out.

I let go of her neck and dig my fingers into her hair, pulling her head back and forcing her whole body to arch underneath me.

The knife in my hand drags across her collarbone with enough pressure to just barely draw blood. Red wells in the line I've made across her skin, and the slow trickle brings me a sadistic satisfaction.

"Little girl. Little girl." I tsk. "Whatever will you do? You've been caught by a very hungry wolf."

She whimpers and I snap to gaze at her face.

Tears are welling in her eyes and they shimmer with fear, real fear. Not arousal or lust, but true genuine terror.

“No.” I bring the knife up just beneath her chin.

She flinches.

“Fight. Fight, little girl,” I growl. “You want control? Take it. Power? It’s yours. Just fight,” I beg.

I can see her sinking into the same fearful mindset I witnessed hours ago. I feel her trembling underneath me. Her eyes glaze over and the panic sets in for her.

My mind races.

No. She fights me, not demons.

I toss the knife to the side and bring my hands to either side of her face.

“Little girl,” I growl.

No response, just her panic taking over.

“Juliana!” I bark, desperate for her to come back to me.

Nothing, again.

I search my mind desperately for a way to bring her back to me, only to come up empty.

She’s shaking and gasping for breath. The whole scene makes me feel helpless.

Leaning on my instincts, I bend down and take her lips with my own. I force her to open for me as I plunge my tongue into

her. I move to wrap one of my arms around her waist and pull her up to be flush with my own body.

She struggles against me, but I hold her firmly.

My lips move from her own to trace her jaw, the shell of her ear, the column of her neck. All the while she's clawing desperately at my arms, hard enough to draw blood.

"Come back to me," I whisper into her ear. "Fight for me, dife mwen."

She comes for my face with her claws but I catch her by the wrist before she can make contact.

I kiss her forcefully again, biting down on her lip as I retreat. She sucks in a breath at the sensation.

"I can't fight your demons for you, Juliana. Fight for me. Fight for yourself. Please."

Something about my words seems to register and her struggle lessens.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, brushing strands of her hair from her face as I bury my own in her neck, breathing her in.

Silence consumes us as we sit there pressed up against each other, my face pressed into the crook of her neck.

"No," she finally manages. "Never apologize. I want this, need it. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I scared you, dife mwen," I admit.

"You didn't scare me. I was lost in a memory," She brings my face up to meet her own and I see her truth written so

plainly there. “You brought me back.”

She’s so strong. Strong enough to still show vulnerability after everything she’s been through.

I hesitate to ask, but I need to know.

“Do you want me, Juliana?”

“Yes. Fuck. Yes, I want you, Cy.” As if she can’t get them out in the open fast enough the words come rapidly on a single breath.

“I don’t know if I can be gentle with you,” I confess.

“I don’t need gentle, Cy. I need you.” She leans in to kiss me tentatively. “If I wanted gentle or tender, I have the others. I need your hardness.”

A laugh bursts out of me at the double entendre and she glares at me.

I dive in to kiss her, again biting at her lips as I retreat. I need to feel her against me. To have her close.

I lean back in to kiss her again and this time she presses herself back into me. Our kiss is deep and intimate. But she meets me stroke for stroke as we consume each other. Our movements are growing more frantic and now she’s clawing at me for an entirely different reason—trying to remove my shirt.

“Cy,” she says breathlessly.

“Juliana.”

“Please, Cy. Please,” she begs.

“Tell me what you need.”

“More. I need more. Please, Mesye.”

Meysel.

That’s all I need to know, she’s back.

She hits a snag in my shirt and I feel cool air rush across my chest as the fabric rips down.

“Tell me you want this,” I drawl.

“More than anything, Mesye,” she responds breathlessly.

Her hips rock into me, grazing against my quickly thickening length.

I’ve been hard since we started this game, but now, hearing her tell me she wants me more than anything has me harder than I’ve ever been with anyone else.

I press myself more tightly against her, resuming the journey of my lips up and down the column of her neck. I come to the wound I made on her collar and pause to place a kiss across the cut.

Reaching down, I start to massage her heavy breast. My thumbs go to circle her nipple, and she lets out a small whimper. Her full breasts are pushed into my chest, and I don’t fight the desire to bend down and bite at her nipple through the fabric.

Being with Juliana is like nothing I’ve experienced before.

Ember and I have a soul connection, a thread ties us together until death do us part, but never forces us together. We’ve made a choice to be together.

But with Juliana, it's magnetic and inevitable. I'm caressing every inch of her body greedily. Each sound she makes is like the hum of nature. It feels so right, so effortless, to be with her.

We settle into a rhythm of touching and caressing each other. My mouth hovers over the delicate flesh of her neck, desiring me to bite down, to claim her as mine, but I resist.

I want to try and be gentle, but the more we connect, the more that willpower slips away.

When she reaches to caress my swollen cock underneath my jeans, I lose all control.

Her body is *mine*, as I sink my teeth into the column of her neck. She shrieks in response, but whether it's in pain or surprise or desire, I don't know.

"You want me to force you, take you. Don't you, little girl?" I growl into her neck. "You want to be mine, but you're going to fight it. Aren't you?"

She tries to withdraw from me but I have her held firmly by her hip and the back of her neck. Writhing now, she tries to escape my hold, but it's no use.

I have her.

She's *mine*.

I pin her down with my knee at her hip and my forearm on her throat. With one hand I take her button up shirt and rip it down the center, sending buttons scattering. Her breasts, covered in a black lacy bra, are exposed to me, and the sight draws me in.

I marvel at her figure, how soft her body is. How it contrasts her strong will.

Pushing her back by the shoulders, I trail kisses from her neck down to her stomach, licking each scar and stretch mark as I go. She twists away from me but I hold her firmly in place as I imprint my desire on her skin.

When I bite down on her hip, she resumes her struggle. Fighting against my hold, kicking and thrashing this way and that. She knows from our training how to truly end things if it's too much. But she's stubborn and I'm certain she won't safe-out.

I loosen my grip to check in on her for a second. I want to see how she reacts to a little bit of freedom and immediately she's back on her feet headed away from me.

But this time I don't give her a head start. I go after her immediately and catch her by the wrist out in the hallway.

Spinning her toward the wall and pinning her there has her breath coming hard. I press myself up against her, caging her in, and take the opportunity to push her shredded top off her shoulders. Next, I free her breast from their container of lace, and she shivers at my touch.

"I've caught you, little girl. Twice, now. Did you really think running from me would work?" I don't expect a response but she gives me a small shake of her head. "Do you know what I want from you?"

This time she knows the play we're enacting.

“Please. Don’t, Cy. Please let me go,” she cries. “I don’t want this.”

“Little girl, little girl. How naïve you are. Do you know what happens to little girls who cry wolf?” I taunt, tracing her jaw with my lips as my hands wander her curves. “They get eaten.”

I flip her to face the wall and lift up her skirt to reveal her bare ass and cunt—no underwear hiding her from me.

She attempts to struggle, but only manages to rock her hips back into my steel erection. The move seems both intentional and totally on accident.

I drop to my knees and run my tongue through her slit, already wet with her arousal. I grope her as I lick and suck at her cunt, building her pleasure.

A smack across her ass makes her cry out and I grin into her pussy.

She’s already wet for me, but her fear and adrenaline tighten her channel, barring entry.

No matter.

I said I couldn’t be gentle.

I stand and unbuckle my pants, drawing out my thick cock, and align myself with her entrance. I tease her, running my head back and forth between her folds before forcefully thrusting into her tight cunt, which makes her cry out once more. She’s so tight and warm, it’s like being suffocated by

bliss. With each brutal thrust I make my way deeper into her until I bottom out. I'm fully buried in her.

For a second, I pause to revel fully in the glory that is her pussy. My little girl simultaneously relaxing into the connection between us.

Before she can fall into subspace, I pull out and flip her around to face me, only to return to her with violent force. Each time I fill her she cries out in pleasure and pain.

On the next thrust my hand comes down on her exposed ass and she lets out a shriek that is sure to wake the whole neighborhood.

Just then, we're interrupted by someone turning into the hallway.

“Motherfucker!”

FU In My Head

EMBER

“Cy! What the fuck, dude? Again? Really!” I snap at the sight of the red running from Juliana’s shoulder.

I’m unbothered by the sight of Cy’s cock fully buried in Juliana’s pussy, but fuming at the sight of blood on her shoulder.

He shouldn’t be fucking with her like that. Fucking her, fine, but not *hurting* her.

“I thought we talked about this!”

“Ember...” Juliana starts, trying to push Cy off of her. “I’m so sorry. I... I...”

She’s speechless but it takes me a moment to realize why she’s so unsettled.

“Oh, shit! You think I’m mad,” I exclaim.

“I mean...” she says, looking worriedly back at Cy, his cock still rocking deep into her vagina. Her meekness is so different from her normally vibrant nature. It’s odd to see her hold herself back like this.

“Yes,” she says, the word turning into a moan as Cy thrusts into her.

“Shit. No. I’m cool with whatever is going on here,” I say while forcing myself to stop staring at her exposed breast streaked with a trickle of blood.

“Wait... what *is* going on here?” I ask.

Cy looks smug as fuck, but it’s kinda fun to see the nervousness underneath, too. It’s cute to see how Juliana makes my stoic soldier all flustered and off-center.

His lips roam her body as I observe them, and I hear the soft reassurances he whispers to her with each thrust he takes.

“Oh! Are we fucking away feelings? Love that for y’all.” I laugh as Cy’s hips roll forward again, pushing his cock deep into Juliana, making her squeak in surprise. “Okay, I’m grabbing the first aid kit, snacks, and water. Then I’ll be back.”

Juliana’s head whips to me at my announcement and she looks taken aback. I just smile and turn on my heel to head to the kitchen.

“Oh, and you might want to move to the playroom if you’re gonna keep going at it like this. Easier cleanup,” I call over my shoulder.

I can barely hear Juliana questioning Cy over the sounds of him slowly fucking her as I leave the hallway, asking what the fuck is going on and why I’m reacting as I am. Deep moans briefly interrupted each of her questions brought on by his pounding into her. But they don’t stop, thank goddess.

The truth is, I want this. Probably just as much as they do.

I couldn't ask for more in a partner than Cy. He's always understood me and accepted our relationship wouldn't include a physical component. It never mattered to him.

There have always been others.

Just as I have no control over the fact I feel no sexual attraction, Cy has no control over his need for that kind of intimacy.

But intimacy is the wrong word for it because for a long time now it's just been sex with different partners, men and women alike. Maybe they're consistent partners, but there's never really been a grounding connection within those relationships. And like clockwork, every quarter that partner gets replaced, and the cycle starts anew.

Seeing Cy with Juliana like this, where he's totally comfortable showing her everything he has to offer and her complete acceptance? It's liberating.

I want this for him, for us.

My relationship with Cy was progressive yet instantaneous. We joke it was love at first gunshot, but the truth is it took much longer for us to truly come to terms with our feelings for each other and the dynamic of our relationship. The same is unfolding with Juliana.

Cy *knows* Juliana.

They've spent time together. I can tell Cy can't hide from her anymore, not entirely. His walls are coming down and he's

building a real connection with her.

The fact that their physical relationship has taken such a careful journey is for both their benefits. They didn't rush into anything, and they have a foundation for what I see could be a lasting relationship.

I want that for them.

In the kitchen, I start gathering everything for a charcuterie board: cheese, gluten-free crackers for Juliana, nuts, fruit, et cetera. The entire time I'm assembling, I'm grinning like a fool, thinking of how perfect everything is right now.

Well, no. Everything is shit right now.

But at this moment, in the playroom, between Cy, Juliana, and I?

Yeah, things are pretty damn good.

Once I finish arranging all the food, I pull a few bottles of water out of the fridge before grabbing the first aid kit from underneath the sink and stashing it in the crook of my arm. Once I have everything we need, I navigate through our home to the playroom where I hear moans emanating as I approach.

When I enter, I see Cy has her sprawled on the floor mat in the center of the room. He is burying his face in her pussy and Juliana is rhythmically rocking into him further with each movement of his mouth.

I place the board on the side table, silently congratulating Cy on remembering to put out towels and other necessities *before* engaging in play.

Turning to face them, I admire the way Cy and Juliana's bodies join together. I might not need or desire sex, but I know, objectively, these are two beautiful people fucking right now.

It's a sight to get lost in.

He flips her over in one swift movement, settling her so she's ass up in front of him with her on all fours. He runs his hands in circles on her ass before placing a well-placed smack at the peak of her ass cheek. Juliana moans and sinks down, resting her upper body against the cushion of the mat.

A few more hard hits to her ass have her pushing back into Cy's erection.

I'm drawn to them, to the perfect pair they make.

Grabbing a handful of nuts, I make my way to my chair in the corner where I plop down and curl up to watch.

This is my favorite part, the watching. Witnessing how Cy's partners react to his touch, his caresses. But never his kisses, until now.

Cy places a kiss at the base of Juliana's neck and moves down her spine. When he reaches the base, the kisses turn into bite into her ass before he straightens up.

He takes his time lining himself up with her entrance, letting his tip pass up and down her folds, which has her squirming. I nearly choke on an almond when he pushes into her. The movement of his cock sliding in and out is mesmerizing.

They move together with such synchronicity it's hard to remember this is their first time together. I focus on the movements between them; the rise and fall of their chests, and the sway of their hips as he pushes into her and she pushes back. I'm so focused on how they're joined I nearly miss when he speaks. "Look at them, little girl. Watch how they study you."

Her eyes snap up at his command, and our gazes connect from across the room.

I want her to see me, to see what intimacy means for me.

As I undress, her eyes go wide and I enjoy the surprise that has her jaw dropping and the moan she lets out as Cy slams into her once more. I take off each piece of clothing slowly, letting her take in everything at her own pace, only moving on to the next article of clothing when the first is finally crumpled on the ground, leaving my underwear for last.

My clothes removed, I pick up the wingback chair from the corner and move it so it's positioned right in front of her.

Close enough to look, but not to touch.

I settle into the chair like a second skin, throwing my leg over the armrest to put my vagina on display for her to see.

"Do you like what you see, little girl?" Cy growls as he pounds into her. "Do you like how they put themselves on display?"

I don't like to be touched, but it doesn't mean I don't enjoy playing my own part in the production.

My place is before them.

When Juliana reaches for me, I lean forward and catch her by the hands. “Uh uh uh. Just look, don’t touch.”

“Yes...” she trails off, looking for the right word.

“Captain. They’re captain when they’re in charge,” Cy informs her, slowing his movements.

“Yes, Captain.” Juliana sighs as Cy continues to slide in and out of her, and her eyes flutter closed briefly.

She groans and lets her head drop, but Cy won’t stand for that. He likes it when they watch, when they witness. I take her by the chin and guide her gaze back toward my own. When we lock eyes, a shudder runs through her whole body and I feel her shake in my hold.

“Do you like that? Do you like when someone else is in control?” I ask.

“Yes...”

At her hesitation, I take her firmly by the throat.

“Yes, Captain.” The reminder seems to comfort her, and her eyes start to glaze over as she slips into a headspace I envy.

“Fucking isn’t the only way to be pleased, you know. Sometimes all you need is a firm hand.” I wink at Cy, and he swats her across her ass. “Sometimes looking is better than touching.”

With that, I lean back into my chair and begin to run my hands up and down my body. I caress my pale breast as Cy

picks up his pace. I time my own touches with his movements, mirroring the timing of his thrusts with the movement of my fingers over my skin. Juliana whines in as I move down my torso to trail my fingers lightly over my thighs, passing my opening each time, but never touching. Her eyes never stray from the path of my touch as I explore my body.

It's been a while since Cy and I have done this. Since I have let someone enjoy my own form of pleasure as much as their own. But Juliana is different. Or at least I want her to be.

I want her to be a part of us, to take possession of the part of Cy's heart he keeps such a tight grip on, and to let herself fall into the comfort I want to offer her.

Nothing is quite as tender as the scars of the past, a concept I'm sure Juliana knows well after all she has been through. But letting someone in, letting myself relax enough to want to be vulnerable with them, that's precious.

That is magic.

Her face goes slack on Cy's next thrust and he lets out an animalistic sound in response, letting me know she's close to coming.

My touch finally trails down to my labia, and I stroke my clitoris.

The slow circles I place there have Juliana's complete attention, which seems to set her off. She's shaking and convulsing as she comes to completion, and it's not much longer before Cy is following her over the precipice of

pleasure. Witnessing their bliss is all it takes for me to find my own completion as a subtle warm feeling radiates through me.

Juliana is gasping for breath. If not for the grasp Cy has on her hips, she would have collapsed already.

Cy's chest is heaving with exertion and he gives me a sardonic look.

“Oh, fuck you, Cy,” I snap back.

“You didn't think I'd notice how you got yourself off? You fuckin' know you liked that.” A laugh rips out of his throat, and I can't help but smile at his humor.

“Yeah, well, your cum is currently running down her thighs, so maybe you should take care of her before mocking me just because I wanted to join in this once.”

Cy pulls Juliana, who looks like a content noodle, up to his chest as he pulls out of her. More cum runs down her thighs, mixing with her own release.

I get up and place a quick peck on Cy's cheek. “You clean her up, I'll take care of y'all.”

Cy takes her to the bed positioned along one and when I reach the side table where I placed the food, I toss him a towel from and redress quickly before grabbing the food.

With our snack in hand, I turn to look at them. Two beautiful humans who are meant to be together. Not in the same way Cy and I connect, but in a way that makes them both radiate pure peace.

Juliana is completely unresponsive as I approach. Cy finishes wiping her clean and tosses the towel to the side. He's positioned above her as he rests on his forearm, looking down at her resting form. Tenderly, he pulls a blanket from the foot of the bed to drape over them both.

I set down the food and climb in with them, then grab some grapes off the board. "Are you okay, my little noodle?" I joke.

Juliana hums in response.

"Can you eat something for me?"

A slight nod is all I need in response, and I position a single grape on her lips. I feed her small bites until she's fallen fast asleep and smile at the sight of her. She's so relaxed and completely unconcerned with everything else going on.

This is how I want her to be. I want her to be content, satiated, loved.

Cy and I connect gazes over Juliana, his mouth forming the words just as I think them.

I love you.

Hostage

HOSTAGE

It's only been hours since we were all congregated at the hospital, but it feels longer since I last saw Juliana. She's the whole reason for all of this, for all of us coming together. More vital than that, she's the reason we've stayed together.

Cy and Ember started off as hired hands.

Sage was supposed to be a temporary savior.

Griffin came out of nowhere.

It's been Julia and me against the world, but now there's practically an entire army standing behind her, ready for whatever may come.

It's odd to say I've come home considering how little time I've spent at the firehouse, but I can feel she's here within its walls, and it makes everything seem right.

Sage, unable to sit still with her son gone, breezed me through all the discharge protocols and paperwork and drove me back, but then she promptly left to go back to the hospital. She feels compelled to be there. It's the only place where she

has a sense of control and something productive to contribute to.

Considering how my fingers have been twitching since I woke up, I can relate to that need.

Sage set me up in Juliana's room and ordered me to stay in bed, but I've been restless. I can't seem to sit still, and the longer I go alone with my thoughts, the darker they turn.

Memories of everything building up to Juliana dragging me out of the fire have started to come back to me, each one more gruesome than the last. The man from the hospital who attacked Juliana is the same one who shot me. I think.

Everything's so blurry, yet crystal clear, but nothing about this makes sense.

The knock at the office door had been unexpected. Rosie had already come through in her usual tizzy and no one should have needed me, so I got up to answer it. But the man on the other side was out of place.

He looked dirty, with tattered jeans and a beaten jacket. Everything about him seemed worn threadbare. The way he looked at me was like he was in hell and I was the last thing in his way before he reached the gates. There was a desperate energy to the way his hands twitched and, before I could process, he pushed a gun up against my abdomen.

I remember the muffled gunshot and warmth spreading from my stomach. How rancid his breath smelled when he

leaned over me. The last words he spoke to me before I lost consciousness.

“Tell Griff this is her only warning,” he said.

But a warning for what? And who is “her?”

Why did a man, one I didn’t recognize until today, come after me with a gun? We tightened security after the incident with Chad—John Higley. Even more so after Juliana was taken. So how did he get past all our security personnel?

Yes, a man like Arrick would get angry at the disappearance of his wife and son, but why is he targeting Juliana? Why has she become the subject of his ire?

Deciding that being alone in my room, resting or not, is probably a bad idea, I go to explore the firehouse.

I wander down the hall to the central living area where Juliana and I were first reunited. Taking in the space, I note it’s an older structure, but clearly Cy and Ember have put a lot of love into restoring it. They have exposed the brick throughout, giving it a homey loft kind of feel, but the evidence of its various other upgrades makes it simultaneously feel militaristic.

I wander through the hallways and as I reach the top of the spiral staircase. I hear grunts and cries coming from the ground floor but can’t tell if they’re from pleasure or pain.

Making my way down the stairs, I realize the sounds are coming from two different directions. And, like the directions

themselves, the tone of sounds split into their respective categories as well.

Juliana's voice comes from one direction. Her cries ringing out crystalline with satisfaction. It warms me to hear her in such rapture, and I take a moment to live in her own gratification before a voice in the opposite direction rings out in agony.

I stand frozen, trying to decide which sound to follow, but ultimately Juliana is in excellent hands, and my own are twitching with the need to partake in the brutality that is likely taking place in the opposite direction.

Following the yellow brick road of desperate pleas for mercy makes my whole body tense in anticipation. The bloodlust now simmering under my skin is constantly being stoked to a boil.

Approaching the doorway, I see Griffin standing over a battered man who's cuffed to a chair in the center of the room.

The room itself is a vivid red color with black floors sloping gently toward a drain in the center. There's a table to the side with a variety of instruments available, everything from firearms to pliers—a personal favorite.

I haven't seen Griffin since we parted at the hospital. He seemed to materialize in the hospital with just enough time to catch his friend, and then he disappeared again with Cy and Juliana. But now he's standing, heaving with breath, before a broken man.

“Hey, man,” I interject.

Griffin looks back at me with a vindictive look in his eye, one I know well myself. His chest rises and falls with each clench and release of his fists.

This is a new man standing before me. One fiercely protective.

“You okay, man?” I ask.

His muscles twitch under strain and everything in his body radiates fury.

“Yeah, yeah,” he responds, shaking himself back from wherever he had gone.

The man in the chair attempts to mutter something sounding like “help me,” and Griffin turns back to elbow the man in the skull, rendering him unconscious.

“Brutal.” I laugh. “Love it.”

“Yeah, well... he deserves it, the bastard.” Griffin’s body hasn’t turned away from the man since I entered the room. His full attention is focused on the traitor in front of him.

“How long you been at this?” I ask, walking further into the room.

As I near him, I note the bloody knuckles on his right hand and the corresponding bruises on our guest’s face. Rivulets of blood run from the man’s nose down to his lips, and a thrill shoots through me at the sight.

I know Griffin has the potential to be violent, to survive, but I've never seen it from him. To me, and to the others, he's been Griffin, the soft-hearted man who bakes when he's stressed and loves despite everything cruel in our lives. He's been a grounding presence for Juliana, a fact for which I am eternally grateful to him. He's helped her find strength in a new way and allowed her to explore parts of herself she didn't understand before.

He's... *Griffin*. Not this man before me.

Except maybe he is. Maybe there's more to this man than I realized before. After all, he is, or *was*, a police officer. He couldn't have gotten through without tapping into some kind of fierce energy. And the way he protects Juliana? Maybe I shouldn't be surprised at this new vision in front of me.

"You sure you're okay? You seem... different," I prompt.

He takes a minute to gather himself enough to speak, but when he does, his voice is low and dripping with violence. "Would you be okay? *Were* you okay when Juliana was in danger? I think the fuck not."

He takes a single step in my direction with his fists clenched, and I back myself the hell up.

"Dude. Chill, it's me. I'm not the enemy, okay?"

The way he shakes his head in defeat has me reaching out to him. My hand connects with his shoulder, and he turns to face me with the most heartbreaking expression.

“I don’t know how you did it,” he murmurs. “I don’t know how you can take it.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, searching his face for clues as to where his mind is keeping him captive.

“I found her like that. I found her when she had already gone through so much, but you lived through it, knowing terrible things were going to happen to her. You had to sit there knowing Jules might not be okay.” His breath shudders. “How did you live with it?”

His expression is broken and haunted, like he’s fighting a battle he knows he will lose but he keeps fighting anyway.

I guide him back to the industrial table against the wall where he collapses, head dropped, fingers desperately grasping at the short hairs on his neck.

“Honestly, you don’t. You don’t live with it or become okay with it.” He looks up beneath his full dark lashes, and his puppy dog expression is so helpless that I cup his cheeks so he can’t look away. “What’s going on?”

If ever there was a man at war with himself, just based on his expression I can tell Griffin is the poster boy.

“I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I can live with her constantly in danger.” His breathing is rapid as he speaks. “She cycles through emotions so quickly it leaves me reeling. And when we left the hospital, she had this look about her.”

He takes a deep breath to collect himself, but I catch how his hands shake before he clamps them tight.

“I feel like this is just the beginning, but I don’t know how this can be. I don’t want a future where everyone is constantly looking behind our backs or just waiting for the next awful thing to happen,” he heaves out.

“Okay. Then don’t,” I say simply. “Don’t live with it. You can walk away. No one is forcing you to be here.”

“Fuck no,” he roars, pushing me aside and pacing to the other side of the room.

“Exactly. That’s not an option, is it? So you find a different way to deal, okay?” I try to soothe, but selfishly, I need him back on board. “But you can’t walk away, right? You can’t leave. It would break her.”

He looks up at me then with utter defeat written on his face. “Nah, man. I need her, but she doesn’t need me. She has you. And the others, too.”

I chuckle at how familiar his words sound.

“You’re wrong, you know. She needs you just as much as the rest of us.” I pause. “Tell me, when she dominates you...”

“She told you about that?” he interrupts, jaw dropped.

“I mean, yeah. What did you think we’ve been talking about while I was in the hospital? The weather?” I say, taking a few steps toward him.

“Of course. Y’all share everything.” He’s back to grasping at his hair, a nervous tic of his, I’m gathering.

“But it’s not everything, man. It’s why she needs you.” He looks confused and I clarify, “When she dominates you, it’s different, isn’t it? She’s not Juliana, she’s your mistress. You let her have something the rest of us can’t.”

“Control. Yeah, I know,” he states, rolling his eyes.

“No. Vulnerability.”

He drops his hands and looks at me dead-on. Something in his mind is shifting, and his expression grows curiouser and curiouser. “Vulnerability,” he repeats blankly.

I let him sit with the word, with the implication, with the idea he has something none of us can give her but him, with the importance of it.

“Yes. It’s the only thing she doesn’t know how to take for herself. She will give away her heart, no questions asked, but she refuses to ask for more from others. Even the ones she knows and loves the most,” I explain, and as he thinks, I watch the gears turn in his mind.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why does she need vulnerability?” he asks innocently. “She’s so strong. She shouldn’t need anything from anyone, right?”

“Everyone needs to be vulnerable sometimes. You’re asking the wrong question.” Griffin studies me for a moment before I continue. “You should be asking why you.”

“Why me,” he repeats.

I can see how hard he’s thinking about it, so I decide to cut him a break. Poor kid is not the brightest crayon. In fairness, I know how rage can cloud things, and he’s certainly experiencing that today.

“You wanna know my guess?”

“Of course.” His eagerness is infectious.

“She never asked you. You simply knelt before her and said, ‘I’m here for you.’ And that’s more powerful than any kind of sacrifice I could ever give her.”

Groans from behind us interrupt our moment, and I decide to redirect our attention to something a little less emotional.

I give myself a moment to study the man who’s slumped forward in the chair, hands cuffed behind him. Hazy as my memories of the night of the fire are, I know deep within me this is him. This is the man who shot me. Who threatened me and my family. Who burned Bliss to the ground.

“You don’t have to be just one thing, though. There is another side of you. One she needs just as much as the other,” I say, feeling the words in my marrow as I walk over to the table of instruments.

I sense when Griffin comes up beside me and turn to see a smirk on his face mirroring my own.

“What are your plans for this dickwad?” A sadistic feeling kindles in my stomach. “Anything I can help with?”

“Yeah. For sure,” he replies.

“Alright then, do you want to scare him? Or hurt him?” I ask, grinning wickedly at the man in question.

“Hurt. This man deserves to hurt.”

Poison

EMBER

Leaving Juliana and Cy where they lay feels impossible, but I'm a light sleeper and someone is banging around in the kitchen. It woke me up, rude.

Hence the investigation.

It doesn't surprise me when I find Griffin amid the chaos.

From the doorway I watch him as he moves about the industrial kitchen, flinging ingredients around without a care. He's methodical about measuring out everything into their proper portions, even pulling out a scale to weigh everything at one point.

It's only when he dumps the contents of his bowl on the counter that I notice his broken knuckles and the splatters of blood on his shirt. Looking at him more closely, he looks overwrought, like he's trying to process too many conflicting thoughts all at once.

"Griffin, did you wash your hands before sticking your hands in all that flour?" I scold.

“Doesn’t matter. A lot worse is going in here.” He smirks at the dough in his hands.

“Explain.”

“Don’t ask questions... you don’t want to know.” He hums a tune to himself I can’t quite place. Griffin smiles easily, but his expression right now is cheerful yet hungry, and not the lust filled kind. This man has changed since I last saw him. He’s motivated by anger, as evidenced by the aggressive way he’s kneading dough.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Dandy!” he exclaims with a little too much forced cheer.

“Griffin...” I’m worrying about the kid.

From what I’ve seen, Griffin isn’t the type to take things lightly, and in the past couple of weeks we’ve all witnessed a series of horrors, most recent of which almost cost Juliana her life. He should be reeling, not smiling and baking.

“Griffin. Look at me.” His eyes shoot to mine, and I realize under the plastic smile he has plastered on there’s both anger *and* fear there.

He looks away as he folds and kneads the dough on the counter, making it into a more loaf-like shape. As he works, his whole body relaxes. Everything about him seems to still and calm, and the hectic energy surrounding him dissipates.

“Griffin, talk to me,” I implore.

“We took Kutter to the red room.” He sighs as he continues to knead the dough, unphased, as an ear-splitting scream tears through the room. “That must be Jay. He sure works quickly.”

The cry makes me jump out of my skin, and I whirl toward the door in shock. “Griffin, what the hell is going on?” I demand, turning back to face him.

I wait with him while the gears turn in his head. He looks conflicted, like there’s something he desperately wants to share but is afraid of my reaction.

“You know that feeling right before you drop on a roller coaster?” he begins softly. “That feeling of anticipation that both thrills you and makes your stomach roil?”

“I mean, it’s been a while since I’ve been on a roller coaster, but sure.”

“Jules is...” He finally looks up at me. “Jules.”

“Right,” I say, leaning into him, unsure where this is going.

“Everything that’s happened is because of her, but it’s not like she’s to blame.” He kneads and rolls the dough a few more times as he contemplates. “But the good and the bad are all really because of her. And I’m trying to focus so hard on the good.”

I understand his conflict. I would wish none of this on a person, and it’s unfair to say Juliana is at fault for any of it. It’s also untrue to say anything other than she is at the center of everything that has happened.

“I mean... yeah. The whole thing is fucked up. But it’s ours, right? We’re in this together,” I supply.

“Are we, though?” He gives me a look so vulnerable and lost it would make stone weep.

Looking at our situation from an outside perspective, I can see where he’s coming from. We’re all here for her, essentially. Juliana is the focus of our attention, but she never asked for that. Nor does she really need it. From what I’ve seen of her, the woman is flighty and more than a little impulsive, but she’s capable.

He’s right, though. No one is talking to each other, and we’re all making assumptions based on things we haven’t actually talked about. Juliana has been fucking away her hurt and we’ve been allowing it, but collectively, no one has put any thought into how to proceed. The rest of us are just oscillating in her orbit, waiting for a decision to be made.

He looks up from his kneading, shocked. “No, really. We’re circling each other, but no one has landed on a plan and we haven’t really come together at all. We’re fuck buddies at best, roommates at worst.”

“Yeah.” He sighs.

“You want more than that, don’t you?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Another cry from the direction of the red room interrupts our conversation.

“Griffin, you need to tell me what’s going on or else I can’t help you.”

He finishes preparing the bread before placing it in a basket and covering it with a dish towel. He stares at the basket for a while before shrugging and saying, “Jay is doing his thing. I’m baking.”

“That’s not enough, Griffin.” I walk over to the kitchen sink and grab a sponge to start wiping down the counters with.

“Fine,” he snaps. “Jay is fucking torturing a man I used to consider a fucked-up version of a friend, while I’m baking a loaf of fucking sweet bread with thallium in it. Happy?”

He’s breathing heavily and gripping the countertop like he would collapse without it. His entire body is shaking. As soon as the tears start, I throw down the wet sponge and reach for him.

“Hey. Hey, now. Hey, now,” I soothe, gathering him in my arms.

I forget sometimes how young Griffin is. He was alone for such a long time and undercover work isn’t easy—I would know. But before that, I don’t think he’s had anyone who’s truly been there for him in a while. He’s never spoken about any family he has or any other attachments. The kid has likely been on his own for his entire adult life, and right now, with him collapsed in my arms, it shows.

“How long does the bread need to do its thing?” I ask, trying to redirect his attention as I hold him tightly.

“One to three hours.” He snuffles into my shirt.

“Okay. We need to sit down and talk then.”

He nods, but it’s halfhearted.

Griffin pulls away from me, and it’s clear he’s doing his best to bring his emotions back under reign, but there’s a piece missing. He just looks lost.

“Griffin, I want you to clean up, wash and bandage your hands, and go sit down. I’ll be back,” I direct, which seems to bring him some comfort, like it’s the only thing holding him together.

I rush upstairs to the office Cy and I share. The Ascendancy Collective likes to joke it’s our war room—one side covered in more artillery than you can shake a stick at and the other dripping in tech—but really, it’s just a room with a table and a bunch of chairs in the center and our desks at either end. Nothing more, nothing less.

Grabbing my laptop is priority number one, but before I head back to the kitchen, I turn back to grab other supplies—sticky notes, pens, highlighters, et cetera. You never know, right?

When I return, Griffin is sitting at the table with his head hung. His dark hair has grown out since we first met and it hangs in his face.

Sitting down across from him, I take in his intense features. When he looks at me, I think I see a shimmer of why Juliana loves this man. He’s a kind soul, and he gives his heart over to

those he trusts, of which I'm not sure there are many these days. The fact he feels comfortable enough with me to show his fear is empowering.

I feel for the guy. I really do, but there's a lot going on and we can't really afford to fall apart. We can get through this. We just have to trust each other.

"Okay. I need you to tell me everything you know," I start.

"Everything?"

"Everything. From the first day they assigned you to Arrick's case. I need to know all the details. What's your role, what he's into, how his operations work, everything. Got it?"

"Yeah. I can do that," he says, his confidence returning.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." He gives me a halfhearted smile.

That's the truth of it, though. We're never as ready as we want or need to be. We only have the moment at hand to put it all on the line.

Don't Stop the Devil

Cy

Sea of sticky notes.

I walk into the kitchen and all I can see is the mounting sea of sticky notes. Amongst them I spot Ember, who has clearly had too many energy drinks, and Griffin, who looks like he needs another one or he's going to fall over.

“What in the actual fuck is going on here?” I ask, exhausted already.

“Oh. Cy! Good. You're here!” Ember is moving at one hundred miles an hour and headed straight in my direction. “Okay. So. Griffin and I sat down and started going through his history with Arrick. We started with his time at the police academy—he was a good boy back then. Then we moved into how he got assigned to Arrick's case—still a mystery, IMO—but I have a couple ideas after hacking into the police database.”

“You did *what?*” I exclaim as they pull me to the table where the kid is collapsed.

“No worries! No one can track me, you know that. Anyhoo...” they say, drawing out vowels as they shove me in a chair at the kitchen table. “Griffin got assigned to Arrick’s case and started as a low-level grunt, right? Right. But our good boy worked his way up and became Arrick’s head of security for Mathieson enterprises, right? Right? Right?”

“Ember,” I warn.

“Nope. No interrupting while I’m on a roll, buddy!”

“Buddy?” I murmur to myself.

“Just roll with it,” Griffin mumbles, half asleep.

“So. Get this. Arrick went through seven—*seven*—heads of security before our good boy took over. Seven! Can you imagine? And that was only in the first two years. And then... and then Griffin stayed in his position for a whole two years before... well, you know.”

I’m stunned speechless by the rambling vision before me. I haven’t seen Ember this animated since they figured out how to hack into the Army database and delete all of our old records—ultimately freeing us up to do work in shadier channels—but that was around ten years ago.

“Cyyyyyyyy. You’re not listening,” they continue, snapping in my face and bouncing around. Then they start grabbing sticky notes off of every surface in the kitchen. “Okay. So get this. Griffin stayed on for so long because he implemented a new security system—the one I *already* broke into—but it got our good boy a gold star making him trustworthy. Right? So

Arrick let himself slip around him once. Once! He got drunk and told Griffin a bunch of finance stuff. Do you know what this meeeaaanns?”

They’ve got sticky notes in their hands like they’re winning lottery tickets and their eyes are wide with adrenaline, making them look cartoon-like.

“Um... Arrick is really shitty at keepin’ his mouth shut?” I reply.

“Yes! I mean... no. Well, yes. Ugh.”

“Griffin, how much did you let them drink?” I glare at the man in question as I rise to go to the fridge.

“They’ve been downing cans of energy drinks since we sat down. It’s been like six hours now. So, maybe like ten or twelve total?” he supplies groggily.

“And you didn’t stop them?” I ask in shock. “I take my first nap in like twenty years and I come back to this?”

I stop at the cupboard to grab a water bottle and begin filling it with iced water for Ember—their preference no matter the weather—and start up the coffeemaker for the kid who looks barely old enough to drink it.

“Awe. You took a nap with Juliana. That’s cute! Y’all are *cute*. Did you have a nice nap at least? You look refreshed. And there’s a bit of drool on your shoulder. *Cute*.” Again with the drawn-out vowels.

“Ember. Sit. Down,” I bark, screwing the cap on tightly.

“No. Nope. No bossing, Mr. Bossy,” they chant, pacing away from me. They continue to pick up sticky notes from around the room until I catch them in my grasp by the back of their neck.

“Lòt mwatye, listen to me. You need to slow down for one minute. Sit down. Take a breath. Drink some water. Then continue,” I murmur into their ear.

“Fine,” they huff, taking the water bottle I offer them and lowering themselves carefully into the chair I’d abandoned.

The second Ember’s ass hits the chair, though, their entire body melts and I watch as they crash. Their eyes flutter lightly and their posture slackens until they’re practically laying across their chair at the table.

I turn to Griffin. “Do you want to tell me what got Ember so worked up?”

“No, I can do it,” Ember says weakly as I press my thumb into the knot at the base of their neck.

“Um... yeah. So, I have all of Arrick’s tax information.” He’s looking at me as if that means anything.

“Al Capone,” Ember mumbles through a groan.

“Taxes,” I confirm.

“Yes. Taxes,” Griffin repeats back as he slowly comes back to life. “Or lack thereof.”

“And what exactly are we planning on doing with his taxes?” I ask Griffin.

“Ugh... You’re not getting it. He’s not getting it, Griffin!” Ember whines under my touch.

“Okay, then explain it to me. And go slow.” I leave Ember to go back to the coffeemaker and pull two mugs from the cabinet, along with the creamer from the fridge.

“Fine. So, I might have hacked into some of Sage’s bank accounts,” Ember explains, taking deep drinks of water between sentences. “And I may have looked through the divorce papers she submitted two days ago.”

“Ember!” I exclaim, looking at Griffin for answers.

“Dude. There’s no stopping them. They were on a rampage with the energy drinks. They *bit* me at one point.” He cringes.

I hear Ember mumble something along the lines of, “He deserved it. He tried to take my favorite highlighter.”

“Look. Listen.” Ember waves a limp wrist at me to get my attention and I come back to the table with my supplies, which Griffin takes gratefully.

With a groan they pull themselves up to stand over the table and start organizing the sticky notes before them.

“I will never understand your obsession with office supplies.” I mumble.

“Hey. You love washi tape,” they snap back before grabbing me by the chin and pointing at various sticky notes, but this time they’re taking breaths between each sentence as they walk me through everything. “I did it for a good reason. Mathieson Enterprises—the shipping conglomerate—*was*

owned and operated by Sage's family under a different name. When Arrick took over, he changed the name, but everything stayed under Sage's control, legally at least, because of some things her grandfather had set up in his will and a few trusts. So, all the assets are still under her name. And everything that's in her name is legal and in good standing with the IRS and everyone, right?"

I nod as they talk, understanding about half of everything they're saying.

"Here's where things get shady," Griffin interjects.

"Arrick used profits from Mathieson Enterprises semi-legally to start a new business. It's a subsidiary of Mathieson Enterprises called M.E. Industrial Supply," Ember continues, walking me through each of the sticky notes. "Only, it doesn't exist. The company's address is a post office box, the number to call is disconnected, and the website is shady at best with like really bad 90s dial up design."

"And all of this means?" My patience is wearing thin.

"M.E. Industrial Supply hasn't been reporting profits and losses to the IRS since its conception. They haven't been paying taxes," Ember states, pointing at one note circled in black ink repeatedly.

"How the hell does that help us then?" I growl.

"Dude. Al Capone. Tax evasion. We can get Arrick arrested for tax evasion."

“I will repeat. How does it help us?” I repeat, turning to Griffin for any kind of reasonable answer.

“It means we can get Kieran back!” Ember exclaims.

“Tomorrow? Or nine years from now when he’s eighteen?” I turn to face them head on. “Ember, please. Be reasonable.”

I’d woken up with Juliana in my arms, and for a second, everything felt right. She was soft and warm and *right*. The second I could tell Ember wasn’t there, though, I was on high alert and came looking for them, careful not to wake Juliana as I left the bed. When she rolled to reach out to me, I wanted to crawl back in with her and hold her until this nightmare was over. But I need the peace of mind that Ember is alright.

Sure enough, Ember is fine, just a little wired.

But going from a post sex slumber to being bombarded with information on tax evasion is grating. Any composure I had from when I first entered is gone. My edges are fraying.

I need answers now.

This isn’t the way to get them.

“Ember, look at me,” I say, clapping loudly to draw their attention back to me. “Ember. Sage is working herself to the bone trying to lose herself in work. And every time she comes back, she has another one of Kieran’s favorite foods, a new toy or gadget he would like, and I think she’s changed the sheets in his room each visit to keep the scent he likes fresh.”

“You noticed, too,” Ember murmurs, looking down as I unload my own burden.

“Yeah, lòt mwatye, I noticed.” I drop my forehead to theirs and whisper, “Juliana is acting out in her own way. Jay and Griffin in theirs. I love your optimism, and this can be helpful information, but how is this supposed to bring everyone home right now?”

Something passes between us, and Ember shudders out a sigh. “Now. I want him home now,” they cry.

“I know, lòt mwatye. I know.”

They collapse into my shoulder, and I look at Griffin who’s staring at us with pure adoration.

“Can you let everyone know we need to have a family meeting tonight?” I ask him.

“Yeah, of course.” He jumps up to scurry out of the room.

We all needed to get on the same page. Before someone breaks.

Overwhelmed

JULIANA

Family meeting.

Cy is calling a *family* meeting.

I had fallen asleep between Cy and Ember in the playroom and then Griffin came in asking me to come upstairs for a family meeting, with the promise of dinner.

Knowing this group, I ran to my room—nearly twisting my ankle in the process—and rushed to get ready.

My body is exhausted, but if Cy is demanding we all meet together? Something is probably very wrong.

The kitchen area is more of a communal space, with the kitchen itself pushed up against one wall and an island separating it from the rest of the room. A massive wooden dining table lives centered on the windows with a dozen chairs surrounding it. It's a space built for large gatherings of people, and when I arrive, everyone is busying themselves about the room. It all seems so normal and yet everything is out of place.

Sage is suddenly back from the hospital setting the table while Cy and Griffin are finishing up food over by the

stovetop. Ember is typing away on their computer, but it's Jay my eyes finally settle on as I realize he's washing blood from his hands.

“What the fuck did I miss?” I ask the room.

Jay looks up to meet my gaze from across the island where he stands. “We can explain.”

“We?”

“Yeah. Griffin and I got up to some fun while you were... occupied.”

I look to Sage for answers, but she seems lost in her own world.

Instead, Ember clarifies without looking up from their computer, “They took Kutter to the red room. Jay's been having a bit of fun with him.”

“We have a red room? What is a red room?”

“Yeah. This place is massive. We wanted to use the communal shower on the first floor for something, and it just felt right when we were making updates. It's fully soundproofed, too.” Ember glares at Jay. “Unless you leave the fucking door open.”

“Sorry!” he calls from the pantry, tossing peanuts into his mouth as he speaks, which muffles his words. “I got caught up in the moment, you know?”

Cy gives him a glare lacking any backbone and I can't help but smile at the small amount of warmth passing between the

two.

Any tension or worry I had when Griffin came to get me is starting to fade away.

Until Griffin yells, “Ahhhh! Nope! No one eats the bread! Bread bad. Bad bread.”

Everyone is frozen in shock. Griffin’s outburst draws Sage’s attention to the conversation, but Ember just giggles and supplies, “It’s for our guest. It has special ingredients you definitely don’t want to be ingesting.”

“Dude. Sick. I love it,” Jay chimes in as he gathers a few dishes and moves them to the center of the table. “I thought you were up to something totally different when you said you were going to go bake shit.”

Griffin looks at Jay, bewildered. “What did you think I was baking?”

“You, Griff. He thought you were gonna get baked,” Cy drawls, rolling his eyes dramatically. “Surrounded by fuckin’ fools.”

I would be taken aback, but the grin on Cy’s face makes me think twice about what’s going on here. He’s comfortable with these people.

It makes a part of me proud we all found our way to each other.

“Alright, time to sit down and eat,” Sage offers, and everyone jumps to put their things away and settle in for dinner.

It's the first time she's spoken since I joined everyone. Studying her more closely, she looks tired, like things are becoming too much.

I cross to her as everyone finds a seat and take her by the hand, giving it a small squeeze of support as we go to sit at the long table.

Food is passed around, and we all eat in a comfortable silence. We've never been like this before, together. We're all being pulled in our own directions with everything going on and it's pulled us apart.

It's only been a day since they released Jay from the hospital, three since Griffin's return, and clearly, they're already teaming up on their own mission. From the beginning, Sage started hiding away at the hospital as much as she could get away with. All the while, Ember buried themselves in their research, constantly staring at their screens looking for anything that could help us get access to Arrick and his compound. And, honestly, I'm not sure what Cy has been up to. If anything, he's been the most present of all of us, almost like he's trying to keep us all from falling apart.

But it feels good to be with all of them like this, eating a simple meal together.

"I found a bunch of Arrick's business documents," Ember breaks the silence, and any atmosphere of comfort that may have existed is now gone. "He's into some really shady shit."

Their gaze turns to Sage and me, and a shudder runs down my spine.

“Tell me,” Sage responds blankly.

“Um... So, I think you already knew about the drugs?”

Sage nods.

“And I think we all made some assumptions with Juliana.”

My stomach tightens. “He’s really deep into human trafficking, too. They set his entire business up as a cover for his transport network. Most of it is domestic, but he seems to get involved with some overseas shit, too.”

A rough voice I’d forgotten comes back with full force.

We were worried you wouldn’t wake up.

Memories of waking up in a dark room in only my undergarments percolate into the present.

You need to stay quiet. Otherwise they’ll hear.

“Juliana was lucky in some ways,” Ember says, snapping me out of the memory.

“How?” I can only whisper so as to not give away the fearful rage that’s building in my chest.

“He kept you close,” they say somberly. “Most of the girls going through his operation don’t stay in one place more than a few days. I was able to suss out his movements after we got you back and things moved *quickly*.”

“I’m lucky,” I say flatly.

No one says anything, but Sage’s hand finds my knee under the table. Her firm grasp on my leg is the only thing keeping

me from running off. The weight of her touch is barely keeping me grounded, but the walls are already closing in.

Lucky.

Logically, I know Ember means well. They're not trying to hurt me. And I'm grasping desperately at the logic of the situation. But everything is quickly turning into a pure whirlwind of emotions, and I'm already suffocating at the center of the storm.

Jay is staring straight at me, and I turn to avoid his gaze.

"Do we have to go through all this right now?" he interjects.

"When else we gonna do it?" Cy responds. "We've been sittin' on our hands for too long already. It's time to do something about Arrick and bring Kieran home."

Sage's nails dig into my thigh, and while I'm hearing everything around me, I can't really focus on any of it. I sit through the entire conversation, barely aware.

I listen as Ember and Griffin share every detail they know about Arrick's operations. How he got into debt and started smuggling drugs on shipments he was already making to make up the difference. I listen as they lay out each piece of the puzzle leading to Arrick trafficking people. How he's manipulated people and systems in order to convince them and the government that nothing is amiss.

Griffin goes into detail about his four years undercover. How Arrick's operation has grown but no one is able to shut him down despite a large number of people knowing about it

all. He fills everyone in on everything he learned from his friend, Quinn, hinting at the possibility of the FBI getting involved depending on how things escalate and what evidence HPD can pull together proving he's crossing state lines.

The entire time, Sage's grip is tight on my leg, and I think it's just as much for her benefit as mine. I'm concentrating fully on breathing evenly, in and out, but the walls keep creeping closer and it's becoming hard to keep my heart from beating out of my chest.

"So, what do we do about it?" Sage asks, staring Ember down like a lioness protecting her cub.

"Nothing." Ember sighs.

My head whips in their direction. "What do you mean nothing?" I growl.

The table falls silent at my interruption. No one but Jay can meet my gaze when I look around at each of them for answers.

"There's not really anything we can do to shut him down. Our best bet is to take it at our own speed, which as Cy pointed out will inevitably be a lot faster than going through any proper channels or waiting on the justice system. So instead, we learn as much as we can, go get Kieran quietly, and get out of there like a bat outta hell," Ember continues. "We can clean up the mess and do the right thing later."

"So all those people? We can't do anything." My vision is clouded by rage as it pushes through the helplessness

threatening, the emotions warring over each other as I struggle for breath.

“I mean. Yeah... unless you want to stage the criminal equivalent of a corporate takeover. It’s probably better to just leave it up to law enforcement. But we can help them out by sharing shit later,” they say.

“And Arrick. He just gets away with all this shit for years until they catch up to him or catch him on a technicality,” I snap.

“Yeah, kinda,” Griffin says meekly.

Jay looks like he is either waiting for me to turn into a puddle or for someone to give him a knife so he can go after Arrick himself.

But I want that.

Arrick is mine.

My devil to deal with.

“It’s not good enough. We need to find some other way,” I say, pushing back from the table and backing toward the door.

“Juliana,” Jay calls.

“No. I want Kieran back safely. That’s the number one priority, but there is no way in heaven or hell we just let him get away with *hurting* people.”

I can feel the tears forming at the edges of my eyes and my throat is constricting, making each breath a struggle. My hands

grip until all I can feel is the sharp sensation of my nails digging into my palm.

“I’m sorry.”

I need to get out. Just away for a little bit.

It’s all too much.

Pray

Jay

I saw her crumbling, and I watched as she reached her breaking point.

The speed with which she left the room was impressive, and it left us all in an awkward silence sitting around the table.

“I’ll go check on her,” I say to the group as I rise.

Everyone is quiet as I exit the kitchen, no one quite sure how to proceed after Juliana’s dramatic exit.

I understand it, though. Her need to escape the moment.

I make my way down the hall to Juliana’s room and quietly open the door. The shower is on, and I hear the sobs come through the open doorway to the bathroom. Defeated, I lower myself to the ground in front of the door and listen to Julia’s cries pouring out with the steam coming from the bathroom.

I debate going to her, but I want to give her a minute alone. It’s a lot to juggle the emotions and needs of five other people, and we’re not making it easy for her. Not that I believe she’s responsible for our emotions or anything, but she just puts herself in this role so frequently it is hard to step away from,

especially under stressful circumstances like right now. Everything is happening so quickly and things are blurring together.

Dinner started off nice but quickly turned into a disaster as Ember and Griffin shared all of the information they had put together. I understand why Cy called us all together, I do, but I also understand why she ran.

Only she can't anymore. Running isn't an option against what we're facing.

It's her turn to stand and fight.

I sit with my back propped against the doorway to my and Juliana's room. Sage set me up here yesterday with a few things when we returned from the hospital knowing this is where I'd be most comfortable.

The room feels like a part of Julia. Like some piece of her has extended beyond herself to ingrain itself in every fiber of the room. Everything smells like her, vanilla and lavender, and the scent sinks deep into me and calms my frayed nerves.

Torturing a man is harder than it looks, and Kutter Monroe is either a tough nut to crack or empty-headed as a balloon. Griffin gave me leeway to get started with him, and each cut across his skin gives me a small satisfaction. But I need answers, for Julia's sake as much as mine.

It's a long time before the water shuts off, but Juliana's full-blown sobs have subsided to small whimpers and I know that, in part at least, she's gotten some of this out of her system.

Standing back up, I make a show of closing the door loud enough for her to hear. I want to give her time to tell me to leave. I need to give her that option, to need me. But there's no dismissal as I make my way to the bathroom door.

Opening the bathroom door wider, I see her standing before the vanity wrapped in a fluffy white towel. Mascara streams down her face, which she rubbed raw in the shower. She's simply looking at her reflection, and there's a haunting emptiness in her gaze.

"Hey, baby doll." I go over and affectionately place a kiss on her cheek as I guide her to sit on the vanity's bench. "You okay? You left pretty quickly."

"Yeah," she answers blankly.

"Awesome. I'm gonna shower really quick. Then I think we get some sleep, alright?" I try to seem cheerful, more relaxed than I have been since the hospital. I try to let all of my own anger—held on her behalf—fade into the background.

"Okay," she replies.

I can feel her watching me in the mirror's hazy reflection and how her gaze appreciates me as I strip out of my bloodied clothes, which she's still yet to comment on. Despite my stay in the hospital, I'm more defined than I was a few months ago because of Cy's help with getting me rehabilitated. My upper body is more toned and I feel stronger, more lethal. There's been a brutal change in me, but it's for the best.

Her eyes are glued to me the entire time I shower. I take my time running my hands up and down my body. Letting her follow my touch over every inch of my skin. I let the soap glide down my form as she admires me in the quickly fogging reflection. Red pools around the drain as I wash, but she never stops watching *me*. It's enough to get a god drunk.

When I step out, she hasn't moved.

I take the time to wrap myself in a towel, leaving just the edge of my tattoo—the one for her—peeking over. Her gaze follows my hands and lands there just as mine follow the small twitches and shudders of her body. It's the tears welling at her eyes that finally get me moving.

“Baby?”

Her tears accelerate, and I sit next to her to take her in my arms, cradling her in my embrace.

“Baby,” I murmur into her hair, still wet from her own shower. “Talk to me.”

Julia is hiccupping through her sobs, and I hold her tight. I run a hand through her silvery hair, combing through the tangles as I murmur into her ear. My nose nuzzles at the base of her neck where I feel her rapid pulse.

“Wanna tell me what's going on in that pretty little head of yours?” I nip at her ear, trying to bring some levity to the moment.

Then she laughs, and her laughter turns into misplaced snorts and giggles. Soon I'm shaking with her in full on

laughter, just reveling in the momentary joy.

“There we go. There’s my baby doll,” I praise. She smiles at me then, the tears on her face drying. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Not yet?” She sounds so unsure, but I let her take the out.

“Hold on one second,” I say.

Quickly, I throw my wet hair into a quick bun as I go to the bedroom in search of clothes. I find a silk nightgown for her and a pair of gray sweatpants for me in a drawer, and I throw them on to hurry back to Julia. When I return, some of the sadness has returned to her expression, and I lengthen my stride to get to her.

“I’m so tired,” she chokes out. “Tired of feeling helpless. Tired of breaking down in tears every time we’re alone. I still feel so broken.”

There’s a part of me loving how vulnerable she is with me, that she can feel comfortable telling me her fears. There’s another part of me enraged at the demons, deceptive ones at that, who still haunt her.

“Baby, you’re not broken. And I know me saying it won’t fix how you’re feeling, but it needs to be said.” I tilt her face to look up at me with one finger under her chin. “You need to hear it until you believe it, and if I have to be the one to tell you every day, then so be it.”

It’s moments of quiet when I truly get to take in all of Julia. How her blonde hair, redder when it’s wet, frames her face.

The slope of her neck and how it connects with her shoulders and the tattoos they display. Her full breasts are begging to be let out of the confines of the towel wrapped around her.

She's beautiful.

She leans back into me as we both look at our reflection in the mirror together. When her face turns back toward me, I instinctively reach to cradle her cheek and she lets out a satisfied sigh at the connection.

"I love you, Jay," she whispers.

"I know, baby."

Wanting her to be totally comfortable, I guide her to stand up and towel her dry before having her raise her arms so I can slide on the nightgown I found. I grab the brush and hairdryer off the counter and motion for her to sit.

"You're going to..."

"Let me," I plead with her.

"Okay," she says, settling back onto the vanity bench.

Starting at the ends and working my way to her scalp, I brush her hair until Julia's eyes are closed and she's humming in pleasure.

"Good?"

"Mhmm. Perfect."

Taking it in sections, I then blow dry her hair, giving them a slight curl at the ends with the round brush. When I finish, I

put everything to the side and place my hands on Julia's shoulders.

She looks calmer, more centered.

"Bed?"

"Yes, please," she replies, and I scoop her into my arms and carry her to the bedroom, being careful not to hit her head on the doorway as we pass through.

It doesn't take long for Julia to drift off to sleep. And laying half naked, clad only in sweatpants, in bed with Julia wrapped in my arms is as close to heaven as I can imagine.

In the silence of the deep evening, I mentally start walking through everything that's happened in the past two weeks since the fire. Everything since I was in the hospital.

Since then, there has been this burning desire to *do* something, anything. The longer the feeling sits in my chest, the darker it becomes. I can expel some of this dark energy on the man we're keeping, but it's not enough to satisfy my demon's long term.

When Julia stirs, I'm drawn from my thoughts, all of my attention focusing on her breathing and the smallest of changes in her expression. Each of her warm breaths on my chest reminds me we're both alive, safe. I take her in, cataloging every part of her, the woman I love.

"I love you, Juliana Marie Morgan. Even after death, I will always love you."

Moderation

JULIANA

*E*ven after death, I will always love you.

I thought I dreamt the words, but I awaken to Jay kissing my neck. I don't think he remembers it, but the first time he told me he loved me was in the hospital—he was high as a kite—but now I know it to be true.

Everything is changing so quickly. It's all becoming more real with each moment, and the intensity of it all is making my head swim.

But right now, I'm drowning in pleasure as he nips at my ear, sending shivers down my spine and making me groan.

The way he touches me lights my body on fire.

His kisses travel down my body. My collarbone is the first to receive his attention, but as he stokes my desire, I need him lower. Grasping him by his hair, I try to push him to where I crave him, but he resists. He's focused on a single mission and won't be deterred.

From my collarbone he moves to my breast, paying attention to one, then the other, like they're the sweetest

dessert he's ever come across. He laps at one nipple with his tongue before circling it, all while he's playing with the other in his fingers. When he moves to the other, the sudden rush of cool air over my nipple makes my back bow, but he's right there with his palm on my sternum to push me back down.

The room is quiet as he makes his way down my body, the only sounds being my desperate panting breaths and his low growls.

This time when he reaches my scars, there's no jolt of shame running through me. I can feel the admiration he has for me in his touch. It makes me feel seen and adored.

He licks a particularly sensitive spot where my thigh meets my apex, and my hips rock up into the sensation.

"Stay still for me, baby doll." Jay's tone is commanding, and I shiver with delight at the way it makes my whole being feel alive.

I try to stay still but it's hard with how my pussy can't help but react to each of his touches, every one making me wetter and wetter. I can feel myself clutching around nothing and I whine in defeat, knowing he won't let me have relief until he's accomplished everything he set out to do. The sensations are all driving me towards a precipice which feels like it will never come.

"Jay," I plead. "I need more, please. Please, sir."

"You'll get what you deserve, baby. I promise." The grin on his face tells me he's going to take his time, though.

He pulls away before he reaches my core and, suddenly, I can feel his breath at my ear as he cages my body beneath his own. The heat of his breath has me turning to face him, but he grasps me by the chin to hold me in place.

“You told me about something a long time ago,” he says, placing his knee between my thighs so it just barely brushes against my core, the rumble in his voice putting me on edge. “You said you’ve never come on your own fingers. Is that still true, baby doll?”

I remember the night I told him that, the night I had my first orgasm with another person, with him. But since then, nothing’s changed. My body has never reacted to my touch as others describe. Jay was the first to make me come with another person’s hand and tongue, but without a toy, I’ve never been able to get there on my own.

“Yes, sir. It’s still true.” He looks at me devilishly, and the glint in his eye makes me hesitate. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to make you come without touching you, that’s why,” he purrs.

“Jay. No,” I say, sobering as I rise on my elbows. “No. Please don’t make me.”

Jay rears back to rest on his knees, looking down at me. The heat in his gaze goes away for a moment but seems to return once he’s made up his mind.

“Baby, your pleasure is mine. Even when I’m not there, it’s mine.” He bites at my throat before backing away on the

mattress from me. “When you’re with the others or by yourself, I want to own that, too. I want all of it.”

“I can’t though,” I whine.

“Yes, you can, baby. I’m going to show you.”

As he backs off the bed, I watch as he traces the column of his throat down to the point where it meets his shoulder, my desire building all the while. His hand’s journey down his chest and stomach down to the apex of his own thighs. “Watch me, baby. Follow my lead.”

I hesitate, but the memory of how he held me last night, how he told me he would love me forever, reminds me of the trust I have in him. “Yes, sir.”

“Good girl.”

I watch, enraptured, as he strips out of his gray sweatpants until he stands before me completely naked.

“Follow my lead, baby.”

My touch mirrors his own, circling and pinching my nipples through my nightgown when he does. I run my fingertips up and down my torso, skimming over my stretch marks and scars, and a tingling sensation builds under my skin.

“Sit back against the pillows and spread yourself for me,” he says as he opens his own legs and I obey, moving back to rest against the rumpled pillows and throwing my legs as wide as I can for him to see. “Open yourself wide so I can see everything, but don’t touch until I say. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” I respond, breathless.

My fingers travel to my slit and I pull my labia apart lightly with my fingertips.

Watching how he looks at me is the most erotic experience. His gaze takes me in like I’m the center of the universe, like nothing else matters. He’s hungry for me but I can see him holding back, remaining firm in his conviction to teach me to bring myself pleasure.

Watching him stroke back and forth between his own legs compounds the temptation to mirror him once again, but he told me not to move without his instruction. So, I wait.

A single finger glides back and forth, and I can see the sheen of his desire between his legs. His rhythm is unwavering and his movements slow and languid. The combination of his gaze and the way he’s touching himself almost forces me to disobey him. But as I watch him enter his own center with one finger, the urge goes away with a single groan.

He pumps in and out, all the while still focused on me. Then he adds a second finger, and he grinds the palm of his hand into his clit. It’s captivating to watch him touch himself and how his breath quickens with every movement he makes.

Finally, I break.

“Please,” I beg. “Let me touch myself.”

“I thought you said that didn’t do it for you, baby doll?” he says with a wicked grin.

“Please.” Around any other person, it would embarrass me to hear my pitiful pleas, but with Jay, I know there’s no judgment. He takes pleasure in my desire. You can see in his expression how he’s taking me in like a ravenous being and I’m his last meal.

I’m still splayed on the bed, waiting for his instruction, barely holding myself back from giving up on following his orders and just throwing myself at him.

The entire time I’m battling my will, his eyes never leave mine. He strokes himself, coming closer and closer again to his entrance, until he once again plunges two fingers inside. In and out he slides, and I can see how he’s building to his own release by the rigidity taking over his body. He’s right on the edge, but every time he gets close, he slows down or pulls back. His movements are slow and languid, until they’re not. The pace moving back and forth between desperate and controlled.

“Do you like what you see, baby doll?” he asks slowly.

“Yes,” I sigh, lust rippling through my body at the sight of him.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Such a good doll for me.”

I can’t help but stare at the sheen between his thighs, how wet he is while he gazes at me. I’m turned on and I haven’t

moved, my pussy exposed to the cool air of the room stirring my arousal the longer he makes me wait.

“Do you want to touch yourself, baby? Do you need to come?” he asks.

“Sir, please. Please let me.”

A new form of desire buzzes through every nerve in my body. My nipples are taugth and aching to be touched, my cunt more so.

“My doll wants to play, is that it?” His voice rings out in his deep tone and sends shivers through me, shivers mirroring how his own body is trembling as he continues to touch himself. “Are you going to play nice, baby?”

I don't know how to respond other than to whimper, and it seems to be the answer he's looking for.

“Start slow and follow my lead.” His voice is thick with tension and lust. I know he's close by the way his rhythm falters occasionally and how his whole body tenses and releases with each pass of his fingers over his clit and into his own channel.

I want to watch him come. I want to witness his pleasure more desperately than I want to chase my own. I want to own the moment and pure bliss on his face.

Following his lead, I release my own folds and draw my fingers through my slit. I'm soaking wet and can feel how my own desire slides through my cheeks. I'm sure I'm leaving a

mess on the bed, but I don't care. At this moment, I don't care about anything but my connection with Jay.

The way Jay is positioned, with the morning light highlighting every angle of his body, makes him look like a sculpture crafted by Antonio Corradini, all delicate lines and curves crafted from hardness. His defined muscles contrast with the soft curves still framing his body.

He's so beautiful.

Both of us are panting now, Jay growing closer to his peak as I chase after him.

When he quickens his pace, circling his clit, I follow. When he slows to force me to draw out my own pleasure, I push myself to relax into the rhythm he creates.

He's masterful in his touch even so far away. Though I can only watch, there's a connection through our mirrored caresses. Everything is heightened by the sight of him and how hungrily he looks at me.

Suddenly he's there and I watch as pleasure ripples through his body. It's all I need to follow him over the edge.

My body shakes after the extended torture he's put me through. I feel heat everywhere, and the cool air brushing over me does nothing to chill the roaring flame of desire still burning under my skin. It only serves to draw out my orgasm, the aftershocks making my body twist and writhe on the bed.

My eyes close as I let out a groan, but Jay's voice forces me to fight the sleep-filled heaviness attempting to overtake me.

“Not yet, baby,” he soothes as he crawls up the bed to me.

When he reaches up to cup my face, I feel the slight tremor in his hand. He looks at me with such worship in his eyes and it feels like my shattered soul is being stitched together.

“I told you. You’re mine.”

His breathing is heavy but his tanned skin barely hides the red flush after such exertion. He rolls off of me and lays back on the bed beside me, pulling me to his chest. It’s incredible how perfect we fit together, how natural all of this is between us.

“Jay?”

“Yeah, baby doll?” He kisses my hair.

“Why didn’t we do this sooner?” I ask.

“What? Sleep together?” He lets out a low chuckle.

“No. All of it.” I pause, searching for the right words. “Why did it take us so long to figure out how well we fit?”

He tenses, and I feel his hold tighten up on me. His hesitation makes me nervous as I feel his heartbeat quicken.

Then, as though nothing had happened at all, a wave of calm overtakes him.

“You’ve always been mine, Julia,” he starts slowly, nuzzling his face into my hair. ” I never considered you might not be with me. And I want you with me, always.”

The depth of his words sinks into my bones as I press myself closer to him, my curves molding into the shape fitting

perfectly with his own.

“And the others. Are you okay that I’ve...” I hesitate to confess what he already knows. “Been with them?”

He flips us both so I’m on my back and he’s hovering above me once again.

“You’re mine, Julia. *Mine*,” he growls, and I can see the possessiveness in his eyes. “But you’re your own person. And you’re capable of more love than I can fathom. So if you want to love them, too? That’s fine by me.” He nips playfully at my ear. “But you’re still mine, always and forever.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Really, baby doll.” He places a single light kiss on my lips.

I’m looking for any hesitation or doubt in his expression, but he’s just as open as he always is with me.

“Baby, no one person can be everything for someone else. Nobody can fulfill a person’s every need.” He lowers himself from above me so his weight creates a blanket of comforting pressure against my own. “Take what you need, Julia. From me. From Griffin or Sage or Cy, even Ember. But if they hurt you, I will fucking end them.”

I know he means it. The threat isn’t empty. It’s full of love and devotion.

It makes me feel safe.

“Do you think Cy or Griffin would teach me how to use a handgun?” I ask as the thought pops into my head.

Jay lets out a roaring laugh up to the ceiling. “I think they would love that.”

I don’t manage to suppress my giggle, and Jay turns to look at me more directly.

“Why do you need to know how to use a handgun, Julia?” he asks.

“Well, for one, I’m really tired of people pulling guns on *me*.”

“Yeah. I could do without that fucking part.” Shadows consume his face as memories scroll across his expression. “What’s the real reason, though? Promise I won’t tattle.”

“I just...” I try to find the right words to describe this deep foreboding lingering in my chest. “I don’t think I’ll ever feel safe again.”

Jay stares at me with pure shock on his face. “Baby...” he starts, pulling me tight to his chest and letting me hide my face in the crook of his neck.

“No. Hear me out. I know I’m safe with y’all. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to go back to that same naïve sense of safety I used to have. I don’t think I’ll ever get to live carefree again.”

“But you should,” he growls.

“And maybe I’ll get close, one day. But there’s no going back, only forward, right? I think this is part of it.” He waits patiently as I pace my breathing, gathering myself to continue.

“I think I need to understand what scares me. I don’t want to be afraid anymore.”

Jay pulls me to lay halfway over his body and his arms wrap around me tightly. His breath is deep and I fall into the same pattern with him. In and out. Over and over until heaviness starts to pull at my eyelids.

“I hate that I couldn’t keep you safe,” Jay confesses.

“Jay,” I say, drifting a little closer to sleep, “it’s not your fault.”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“I know,” I murmur.

“Yeah,” he says, letting out a deep sigh.

We lay there in silence for a while before Jay speaks again.
“I love you, Juliana.”

“I love you, too,” I mumble. “Even after death.”

“Even after death.” He smirks.

My heart warms with love for this man, my best friend, my partner, another piece of my heart.

devil may care

cy

I really shouldn't have resisted her for so long. Because, damn... The sight of Juliana with a Staccato XC in her hand has me hard as a rock.

She stormed into the kitchen four days ago demanding I teach her how to shoot a handgun. I tried to reason with her, tell her she should never need to know how to with all of us to protect her. But her determination was as solid as steel, and ultimately, I gave in.

Plus, I knew if I didn't, she would find someone else who would—likely the kid, Griffin.

But there was also a deep-seated craving to have this special moment with her, to bond with her over a common interest. I wanted to have a moment where she looks at me with total trust, where I can teach her something so vital to her survival.

But damn... I was wrong to wait so long.

Since the beginning, I've seen the inner strength, the fire, that Juliana has, but she's become an inferno. I can admire a

person fueled by anger, but she's running on fierce protective and possessive feelings, which makes it more admirable.

Her anger is directed at one person: Arrick Mathieson. He's the reason she's driving all of us with such force, and everyone is on board.

When faced with danger, there are three types of people who emerge. There are those who cower and those who run, but the ones who stay and fight? They're the warriors.

Warriors stand, they fight.

Everyone else is upstairs while Juliana and I are at the gun range we have set up in the old training room. It's a room of solid concrete. The short end of the rectangular room has evenly spaced stalls between shielding walls to give each person room to practice without the risk of someone else being harmed by a discarded shell or faulty firearm. The rigging above allows us to distance and change our targets as needed.

There's nowhere else where I feel more at home.

And now she's here.

"Do you think this is too much for me? It feels big."

She's looking at me with wide eyes and I get the sense that, despite her determination, she's still surprised I agreed to teach her.

The day Ember and I went to get her, she had an older looking piece in her hand as we went down hallways and around corners, but the way her hand trembled made me doubt she knew how to use it. At least not how to use it well.

But after hearing about the asshole who pulled a gun on her in her own club? And now the man in our basement who dared to do the same in the hospital?

Never again.

I never want to see that kind of fear in her face again.

“You’ll get used to it. It has good sightlines for you and doesn’t have as big of a kickback as some of the smaller stuff out there.” I love the trust she’s placing in me right now. Her nod of confirmation sends a swell of pride through me, making my chest puff slightly. I don’t try to hide my smirk from her. “Now, gun safety. Always. *Always* make sure the gun is unloaded. A leftover bullet in the chamber in a careless person’s hands is how accidents happen.”

“Sure,” she agrees.

“Pick it up. The safety is on, and there’s no magazine in there right now. Pick it up.” Juliana hesitates for a second before doing as I ask. Then she looks at me expectantly. “Now, pull back on the slide.”

Her movements are slow but precise, like she wants to do it perfectly on every try.

“If anything had been in there, it would have ejected. But now you know you’re good,” I say as the slide clicks shut.

As I walk her through the different parts of the gun she needs to know—I’ll have her disassembling and assembling this piece until she knows every screw—my fingers graze over

her own. There's a flicker of heat between us with how near we are to each other, but I ignore it.

"Now repeat it all back to me," I say when I'm finished with my presentation.

As she repeats back my lesson, I watch the small wrinkle appearing between her brows in concentration. Her focus draws me in and I hold back from the urge to take her in my arms.

Since the last time we touched I've ached for her, but this is neither the time nor place.

"Good. Now let's check your positioning." I move her so she stands before the target, me hovering right behind her, close enough to feel the heat coming off her body. "Keep your knees bent and your arms straight in front of you. Whenever you relax your stance, tuck your elbow close to your side and keep the barrel pointed forward. I never want to see you pointing this thing at anyone unless you're about to put a bullet in them."

I guide her through all of her positions, correcting her stance and hold on the weapon as I go until I feel confident she has it down.

"Okay, relax for a second. Put the gun down," I say.

She's so quiet that if I couldn't see the serious look on her face, I would think something's wrong. But she's—rightfully—taking this seriously.

I take her hand in my own, and a bolt of electricity flows between us. Immediately, her eyes are on mine. We're silent for a moment, sinking into the connection, when the door slams open.

"Oh, hello there." I turn to see Griffin in the doorway, and a scowl forms on my lips.

"Get out," I snap.

"Hey, now. Maybe I can help." He smiles brightly and there's such eagerness in his expression and the temptation to give in to his offer grows.

"Out."

"Griffin, please," Juliana implores. "I know you're just trying to help, but Cy has this handled."

His look of defeat is endearing, but Juliana stands firm.

"I can just watch?" he whines. "Jay kicked me out for some alone time with our guest and Ember has banned me from any more baking."

I look at Juliana for an indication of what she wants, but of course, she's already softened to the kid. I know how she feels about him, even if he's oblivious to it.

"Fine, but I don't wanna hear a word out of your mouth," I huff.

"Sir, yes, sir!" He salutes.

I roll my eyes and return my focus to Juliana. Our hands never left each other and we're positioned almost like you

would at a wedding when giving your vows.

The thought of Juliana done up in a white dress does something to me, which I won't explore further.

Refocusing on the task at hand, I manipulate her fingers. "I want your hands like this at all times. Your finger should only be on the trigger if you're planning on shooting. Got it."

"Yes, sir." Internally, I glow at the deference she's showing me.

"When you are going to shoot, I want your fingers like this." I move her index finger so it forms an L shape. "People say 'pull the trigger,' but you do that and I'll fucking rip this thing out of your hand. Only the pad of your index finger should rest on the trigger, and the motion is just a light squeeze. You pull instead of a light squeeze and it's gonna kick up and screw with your next shot."

She's studying how I have her positioned, and I can't help but grin at the look of concentration on her face. Her tongue is sticking out just a little and her brow is furrowed, making me want to smooth it out.

"Now try it with the gun," I say, stepping back.

She goes back to the station I have her set up at and picks up the Staccato. Without prompting, she checks the chamber by pulling back the slide, releasing it with a click, and flicking the safety in place.

I stand to her side as she positions herself in a relaxed position, her finger resting safely on the barrel.

“Okay, show me what I just explained.”

In her ready position, she looks like such a natural. I only have a few corrections, and she takes them with such ease. Her face is serious and beautiful, her profile revealed by her hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Again and again, I have her go through the steps of checking the gun, loading and unloading the empty magazine, positioning herself, and practicing her stance.

The longer it draws out, the more shuffling and huffing I hear coming from behind us.

“You bored yet, Griffin?” I growl when it becomes too much.

“I mean... yeah,” he responds snarkily. “We’ve been here for half an hour and you haven’t let her shoot the dang thing yet.”

“Griffin,” Juliana pleads as she puts down the gun and steps toward him.

“What? This should be fun! Cy’s treating it like you’re getting ready for a funeral.”

“Probably gonna be yours if you keep this up,” I mumble under my breath, but Juliana hears me and scowls.

“Griffin,” she soothes as she approaches him, “this isn’t a joke. I need to take this seriously.”

“Not everything is a game,” I growl.

“I know that, asshole. But this is a little much, don’t you think?” Griffin snaps.

“Oh. You want to fuck around? Happy to make it happen.” I like Griffin enough, but he’s getting on my last nerve, and my annoyance is turning into frustration. I take two strides and get between him and Juliana. “You were there, too. You really want to see her defenseless with a gun to her head?”

That he seems to take seriously. The tension in his shoulders is all the evidence I need.

“Everything’s just so serious.” His voice has gone soft and he looks lost, his head drooping down.

Juliana pushes through me to go to him and guides his face up with her finger under his chin. The connection between them rolls through the room and a new tension takes over.

“Tell me what you need,” she commands.

She’s met only with silence.

“Tell me, pet,” she repeats.

The term is so perfect for him. He’s a puppy looking to her for direction. Her tenderness is laced with her own strength, and I see how much she needs it from him.

Griffin has always struck me as a lost little boy, but right now, with her, he seems eager. Like he knows she can give him direction, purpose.

“You,” he finally responds. “I need you.”

“Do you really think you deserve me?” she whispers, moving to grasp him by the base of his neck.

“No,” he whispers, but the love in her face says this is just a game for them, one I have the privilege to witness.

“But you want to. You want to be mine, don’t you?”

I take a few steps back, feeling like I’m intruding on something.

“Yes” he replies.

“Then beg.”

“Please, Mistress,” he says, slowly dropping to his knees.

The endearment should shock me, but this all seems so natural between them, it doesn’t surprise me at all. He looks good on his knees before her, and she’s practically glowing as she stands before him.

“Please what, pet?”

“Please. Use me, mistress.”

Suddenly, she grabs Griffin by the collar of his shirt, forcing him to stand again. She leads him from the room, and I can’t help but admire how her body moves as I follow behind. She’s graceful—likely from her extensive training as a dancer—yet powerful. The way her full hips move as she strides through the armory makes my cock throb with desire. Her ponytail swishes with every step, and I trail my gaze across the lines of her neck and shoulders.

Griffin, on the other hand, is like a puppy with no spatial awareness as he trots along behind her.

She stops before the door of the playroom and looks directly at me, all the while speaking to Griffin. “You want to be used? Fine. But you’re not going to like what I have in mind for you.”

Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.

Make It Naked

GRIFFIN

Juliana demands compliance. For her, the only option is my obedience.

I need her, desperately. Need to absorb the confidence she shows so easily.

She drags me out of the shooting range and through the attached armory in a blur. As we approach a door I hadn't noticed before, my steps slow. When she swings the door open and we step through, my jaw drops.

Inside is an arsenal of a different kind we just left.

Taking in everything is intimidating. It's a dungeon. A legit sex dungeon.

The deep purple walls are lined with every piece of equipment you can imagine. An X shaped structure, clearly built to restrain, stands in the corner. Cuffs hang nearby from the wall. There are whips and floggers neatly arranged on the far end of the room next to a cabinet I can only presume contains more toys and supplies. There are so many things I've never seen before, and the sight makes me breathless.

Jules is standing in front of a four-poster bed, looking like a goddess.

“Strip,” she orders.

I hesitate, looking back at Cy who stands in the doorway, blocking my only exit.

I don't know how I feel about him. He's attractive but standoffish. His dark features are foreboding. He's perfectly kempt—never has a hair out of place though recently his appearance has softened. My stature shrinks in his towering presence, unlike Ember whose stature is balanced by their warmth. I've seen a softer side to him before, but only with Sage, Jules, or Ember. Never Jay and I.

“Now, pet.” Juliana reinforces her tone with a sharp stare.

I love her like this. Strong. Commanding.

She's a deadly weapon yet still my treasure.

With one quirk of her lips, all of my hesitation is overthrown as my need to obey takes over. Quickly, I kick off my shoes and pull off my shirt in that one-handed way I know women think is sexy. When I reach for my belt, I hear her sharp intake of breath and shifting behind me.

As I undress, she approaches and gathers my clothes. She folds them neatly, piece by piece, and walks them, along with my shoes, over to a bench by the door. She's careful about putting everything down.

When she turns back to me, I'm completely bare to her—and also trying to ignore Cy's lurking presence in the doorway

behind me.

“You were foolish just then, pet. Teasing us. Mocking your mistress.” Her words are as slow as her steps toward me.

Shame tries to overwhelm me, but I fight it.

I only wanted to see her smile. She’s been so serious lately.

“Do you want my anger? Do you need to be punished?” she asks, now only a pace away.

Do I?

The fact she is asking is surprising. She doesn’t normally ask for permission from me. She takes what’s hers.

“He’s practically beggin’ for it, dife mwen.”

I whip my head around and meet Cy’s glare at his interruption.

“I agree. His disruption can’t go unaddressed.” She cradles my chin between her fingers before withdrawing, and a sharp smack stings my cheek. “You will face your consequences now. You will atone as I see fit. Do you understand?”

The throbbing in my cheek stokes my desire for her.

I want this.

Need this.

“I deserve that. Punish me. Please, Mistress,” I say, praying my atonement brings her pleasure.

My desperation is plastered across my face, and her expression softens for a second as she looks at me. Her

gemstone eyes shimmer with understanding. Then, she surprises me by taking my wrist and pulling me to her.

I'm no stranger to her command. It's the only place I feel truly secure. I've learned with her, with the others, that it's where I belong. I thrive under her control.

"Cy," she says, still gazing into my eyes. "You can leave, if you want. Or you can stay and help me with my pet."

I tense up at her offer.

"If my pet is okay with that?" she asks, worry furrowing her brow.

I consider for a second how I feel about having him witness how Jules uses me.

It's not that I don't trust her, or him. I just don't know him well.

"No one gets to play with what's mine without my permission," she promises.

My uncertainty unfurls and I give a small nod.

"Cy?" she asks, turning her face to him.

"Fuck yeah," he says as he approaches behind me. "I'm down."

I'm trapped between them, and the warmth of their bodies pours gasoline on every sensation rolling through my body. I'm on edge in anticipation of what could come next.

Will she flog me? Am I destined to be restrained and teased? The whole room vibrates with the possibilities.

“Hold him here,” she says. But with Cy, it’s a request.

Cy’s fingers thrust into my hair as Jules walks away toward the cabinet in the corner. My head is jerked back to face him, and a sly smile forms on his lips.

“You like to submit to her. Don’t you?” he growls.

“Yes,” I gasp as his smirk widens.

“You’ll be good for her. Will you for me?” Unsure of my answer, I hesitate. “Mmmm, I see. Only for her then.”

I hear the sway of Jules’ hips as she approaches and as Cy lets me face her again, I’m struck again by how easy it is to worship this woman. To fall on my knees at her altar. To love and be loved by such a divine woman.

She has one hand behind her back, but she crooks her free finger and motions for Cy to come to her. Oddly, I mourn the loss of his heat as I stand there naked and shivering without them.

When he reaches her, she leans up to whisper something in his ear. Her words seem to inspire something in him because he turns to me with an utterly devious smile on his face.

Then, she moves with precision.

Hand.

Neck.

Wall.

I’m pulled up and pinned, utterly under her command. Painted cinder blocks pressed against my back. Held tightly in

her grip.

Cy lets out a huff of laughter at my startled reaction, but my mistress is fully focused on me. Her gaze has me trapped, but I don't really want to escape.

From behind her, she reveals a metal contraption and a bottle of lube. My eyes widen at the sight.

“Do you know what this is?” she asks softly.

I shake my head.

“It's a cock cage. Or a chastity cage,” she murmurs, pressing more firmly into my neck. “You're going to wear it for me. Aren't you, pet?”

A shiver rolls through me at her words.

“Say it. Or say no.”

The fact she's giving me a choice means everything.

“Yes, Mistress.”

The grin on her face pleases me.

“Hold him,” she orders Cy.

He approaches and takes up her hold on my neck. He's stronger than her, though, and my breath shallows as he restricts my breathing just enough. A new thrill rips through me at the sensation, at needing to work for breath.

I want to struggle against him, but then Jules is on her knees with her lips around the head of my cock and everything disappears. I groan at the warmth of her surrounding me. Her

responding hum making me buck my hips. I want to lose myself in her, in the sensation of her touch.

My cock is soft as she licks at the base of my slit and then she's there, taking me to the back of her throat. She grasps my balls firmly and moves up and down my cock. Her movements are painfully slow and I want to beg for her to move faster, but Cy's grip on my throat won't allow for words.

Before my cock can harden, my mistress pulls me from the warmth of her mouth and blows cool air on me, making me squirm in her hold.

"Now. Hold still." She kisses my inner thigh.

I watch her capable fingers as she takes the cage apart. When she looks up at me, I smile. Even from beneath me she's beautifully breathtaking.

My cock twitches again and my mistress scolds me. "Pet. You need to stay soft. This is a punishment, but I don't want you in pain."

Carefully she takes the ring at the base of the cage and pulls my balls through one by one. Every touch is torture. I want to obey. I want to do as she asks, but it's hard not to be hard when she's touching me like this.

When she gets both through she lightly takes my, thankfully, still pliable shaft into her hand. She guides my cock through the ring until it sits snugly against my pelvis.

"You're doing so well. It's the biggest size we have," she says as she picks the cage back up. "But tell me if you're in

pain or extreme discomfort. Okay?”

I nod.

“I need you to say it.”

“Yes, Mistress. I understand.”

Slowly she guides the cage to encase me. The cold of the metal is a sharp contrast to the memories of Jules’ warm mouth. It’s a reminder of who I belong to. A promise of faithfulness to her.

I don’t know how I know these things. How something so foreign prompts such strong feelings to bubble up, but for my mistress, it’s easy.

When I’m fully sheathed in the cage, she fastens it to the ring with a lock and rises to face me. Cy releases his hold on my neck.

“I’m keeping this for 24 hours. For your first time.” she promises in a breathy voice, the arousal in her expression clear. “You safe out if you need to. Do you know what that means?”

“Like a safe word?” I ask, taking in deep gulping breaths.

“Yes, pet. Just like a safe word,” she replies, brushing hair out of my face. “If it becomes too much or you’re in pain then you let me know and I’ll let you out immediately.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Cy,” she begins, turning to him. They converse again in low tones as I watch on. The sensation of my cock being

locked away is too distracting to determine their words, though, as I adjust to the feeling.

The shockingly cold metal is slowly warming, easing some of the initial discomfort. It's snug but not tight, just a constant pressure surrounding my shaft. I lean down a bit to study the contraption a bit, but my attention snaps back up when Jules turns back around and unbuttons her shirt slowly. Out of the corner of my eye I see Cy toeing off his shoes, but my attention is focused back on her as soon as her lace bra is revealed.

The black attire she's adopted recently suits her. It highlights her pale skin, and the blonde in her hair is striking against its darkness. It's the same contrast I see between her and Cy as he approaches her—shirtless—from behind.

“You've never seen Cy fuck me. How he takes me.” She taunts with a grin on her lips, her gaze never straying away from my own. “So you're going to watch. Do you understand?”

Her words tempt my cock to stir, but the metal binding me is a reminder of why we're here in the first place.

This is a punishment.

This isn't for me.

She's not mine.

She is under her own command.

This is for her.

“Do you understand me, pet?” she asks again. “You’re going to watch with your face right in my pussy while Cy fucks me.”

Almost Touch Me

JULIANA

His eyes are laden with lust as he gasps, “Yes, Mistress.”

The thrill he sends through me feels like an electric buzz. I love how he softens for me like this. Around the others, Griffin is collected but jovial. He exudes a joy that I think was trapped in him for a long time. He seems lighter since joining us, and I love we can bring that out of him.

But now? Right now, this man is putty in my hands. His expression is serene and the haze in his eyes speaks to pure contentment. His smoldering ocher gaze looks at me with adoration and trust underneath the warm locks of hair falling into his face.

Standing equal to my height, Griffin doesn't shrink in my presence, but rather he grows into himself. Naked and caged against the wall, he looks at me with a vulnerability and fiery lust that complement each other. He's waiting for my next command, but it's stuck in my throat.

It's easy to ask him for dirty things, to command him to kneel and obey. It's harder to ask for the things that ask him to hand me his trust, his heart.

“What do you see when you look at us?” I ask as Cy comes up behind me where I stand at the foot of the bed and draws off my top. “Do you enjoy seeing how he touches me?”

A lick of his lips tells me he likes what he sees, but I want to hear it from him. I want him to say it out loud.

“Use your words, pet.”

“No... Yes? I-I don’t know,” he stutters.

His answer doesn’t surprise me. There’s a battle in him that can’t be easy to face alone, a war between wanting something but not believing you have any right to want it.

“Crawl to me,” I say as I continue to undress.

I watch with breathless anticipation as he lowers himself to the ground. By the time he reaches my feet, I’m bare with Cy naked behind me. Cy’s strong hands caress my skin as Griffin approaches on hands and knees.

I’m overwhelmed by the feeling of rough calluses skimming down my arms. Cy’s thick cock rests at my ass and I shift against him, which draws out a small growl from his throat. I grind back into him and he rocks between my ass cheeks. I can feel Cy thickening and remember how good he filled me before, making me crave the feeling of his cock pounding into me relentlessly.

His cock slips into my slit and rubs against my clit, and I’m momentarily dragged from the present into a moment of pure pleasure. I want to be taken hard and fast. I want to feel the imprint of him in me when we’re both spent.

Griffin is on all fours at my feet, and the thought of him witnessing this connection between Cy and me makes my center clench in anticipation. I want Griffin drooling beneath me. Imagining him watch our own pleasure as he's refused his own sends a thrill through me.

He wants to play? Well then, he's going to be sorely disappointed.

My pet deserves to be denied. He pushed us too far, and now I'll push him to his limit.

I know how badly he wants me, I can see it in his expression. But the only thing he will be getting is a face full of pussy and cock, no release of his own.

"If you're good, pet, I'll let you lick me clean when he's done with me," I whisper to Griffin.

"I would love that, mistress," he says, leaning closer into my cunt.

"Don't move, got it? Not for anything," I command.

"Yes, mistress. Of course," he says, rocking back to sit on his heels before me.

At my pet's last words, Cy's cock comes dangerously close to entering me. I throw my head back in anticipation of him entering me.

"Please, Cy," I cry.

"What? Do you want my cock, little girl?" he mocks.

"Yes."

He grabs me by the chin and forces me to look at him. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, Mesye. I want your cock.”

Everything around us disappears as he licks his way up my jaw, continuing to thrust teasingly between my lower lips. The combined heat of his cock and my pet’s breath driving my lust higher.

“How do you want me to take you, little girl?” Cy murmurs into my neck.

“Force me. Like last time.”

“No. Not with him here,” Cy says, nipping at my ear. “Tell me what else you want.”

A small growl escapes at his refusal, but the one part of me that isn’t lost to the sensations of the moment understands not every kind of play is for every person.

Cy is just protecting us.

“Bruise me. I want you to mark me as yours,” I beg, losing myself between these two men.

A hard smack on my ass makes me jump. “Like that, little girl?”

“More. Please, make me bleed.”

“I will never break this pretty pale skin again, little girl,” he says, dragging a finger up the column of my neck. “But I will leave you redder than you’ve ever been before. Even your tèt zozo zanmi won’t be able to make you scream like I can.”

“Yes, please,” I pant.

Suddenly, the warmth behind me is gone, and I hear Cy’s footsteps retreating. I don’t dare look back for him, instead focusing on the man kneeling before me like I am his queen. I hear when the cabinet doors open and close as Cy grabs something, though.

“Have you ever used a flogger before, Juliana?” Cy asks.

“Yes, Meyse.”

“Good.”

When he comes back, I feel the leather tails of a flogger trace along my bare ass and back.

“Are you ready, little girl?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Bend over. And you might want to hold on to something.” The warning in his tone sends a shiver down my spine.

“I can take it,” I say firmly as I lower my chest and press out my ass to him.

I lied.

As he places the first hit on my back-side, I fall further forward, thrusting my hands into Griffin’s hair and leaning heavily on him. My pussy is right up against his lips, and the heat of his mouth combined with the sting of my skin brings my whole body alive.

Cy gives me a moment to recover, but my attention snaps up as a voice joins us in the room. “Count for me, baby doll.”

“Speak of the devil,” Cy mutters.

“Count, baby,” Jay commands without missing a beat.
“Count the strikes.”

Cy jumps in. “I’ll give you ten to start. You don’t come until it’s on my cock.”

“Yes, sir. Mesye,” I gasp, unsure where to direct my attention.

“How many, baby doll?” Jay reminds.

“One, sir.”

Already my breath is stolen by Jay’s mere presence. He stands in the doorway with his arms crossed, looking sleek in his traditional suit attire, a speck of blood on the cuff of his white button up. His frame looks strong and his gaze is hungry. My eyes take in how the fabric of his shirt pulls against his biceps and how his pants pull tight around his powerful thighs.

Thighs I want to ride like a mindless whore.

Another hit, this time across the tops of my thighs, brings my attention back to Cy. The sting the flogger leaves on my skin seems to strip everything away.

“Two.”

“Good, baby doll,” Jay praises as he moves closer.

Every hit to my body has me tightening my grip on Griffin’s hair. I’m leaning further and further into him, grinding my pussy against his face. But like a good boy, he merely takes it.

He takes in my scent and my warmth but does as he was told. He waits perfectly still, as I'm desperately chasing the friction I crave on his face.

“Open your mouth, pet. Tongue out for your mistress,” Jay orders, ever so attentive to my body and my needs.

Only a second passes before Griffin's mouth is on me. He's still, but his tongue is in the perfect position for me to lean into him and rock my clit against it. I sigh in pleasure, my head lolling forward as I rock.

Another strike hits my ass and I arch back, screaming as the stripes burn further into my flesh.

Jay is in front of me now, looking ravenous, waiting for my words.

“Three.”

“Good. So good for us,” Jay coos, brushing a few stray hairs that have escaped from my ponytail out of my face.

My nipple twists under his touch and I cry out, only to have my scream caught in my throat at the next strike Cy lays into me.

“Four,” I pant.

“Five.” Another lash lays into my calves.

“Six.” One at the base of my tailbone.

“Seven.” Placed at my thighs once more.

It feels like this goes on for hours—Cy laying into my body with the flogger, Jay teasing me with touches everywhere he

can reach, and my body mindlessly rubbing against Griffin. The sensations overwhelm me in a heavenly way. I feel alive, cared for, loved.

I bask in their attentions and glow at the knowledge that these men, they belong to me.

“Ten.” The last strike comes down hard and I scream as a beautiful pain spreads through my body.

I’m desperate for release now, rocking frantically against Griffin’s face. I’m seeking the feeling I know these men can bring me, that they’ve given me so many times before. Frantically I claw at Griffin beneath me and Jay, standing before me, looking for purchase to keep me upright.

They’ve all learned my body, every inch of skin knows their touch. Their nearness alone is a high incomparable to any past relationship I’ve had.

The blunt tip of Cy’s cock comes to my entrance, causing me to moan his name.

“You gonna be good for me, little girl?” he growls.

Jay lets out a cackle. “Little girl?”

“Shut up, tèt zozo.”

“Both of you, shut the hell up and fuck me,” I demand. My desire is out of control, and if they don’t give me what I need soon, I’m going to implode.

My body rocks back against Cy, forcing him a little deeper in me. The pressure of his thick cock is gasoline for my

burning desire. When Jay takes my mouth, I start to lose myself completely in the feelings.

Cy's movements are deliberate, a contrast to Jay's hurried kisses. It's like they both can't get enough of me in their own ways. Cy is savoring the moment, while Jay tries to pull every moan and scream out of me, he can.

Cy's thrusts pick up their pace, and his grip on my hips tightens. Every push in and out of me has me rocking on Griffin's tongue. His stillness is a gift. If he tried to lick me at this point, I would come undone. But I don't want that, not yet. I want to savor every moment I have with these men.

Having satisfied himself with my mouth, Jay moves to suck on my nipples. He laps at one in circles while flicking and pinching the other, moaning as he goes. The way he pushes into my breast causes my back to arch until I'm in reaching distance again for Cy, who grabs me by the root of my hair with one hand as he pounds into me.

"Please. I'm so close." Everything is a swirl of conflicting feelings. The pleasure of being filled and caressed on top of the lasting pain of the flogger, Jay's fingers on my nipple, and Cy's grip on my hair has brought me to the edge. Just knowing Griffin is waiting patiently for his consequences, or benefaction depending on how you look at it, drives me wild. "Please. I need to come."

"Oh, do you, baby doll?" Jay teases as he twists both of my nipples with more force than before.

"Yes. Goddess, yes."

“Griffin?” He shoves him further into my cunt. “Lick.”

That’s all I need.

One lick across my clit as Cy pounds into me and I’m careening over the edge. My whole body buzzes with pleasure. Everything is color and light. Sparks fly through my body as I convulse and shiver through my orgasm.

Soon I feel Cy follow me into the abyss with a roar, and the sensation of being flooded brings on a quieter orgasm. This one rolls through me in softer waves. My body relaxes into the sensation with each quake of my body, having been drained already by my previous orgasm.

Cy pulls out, his release dripping out of me and onto Griffin’s face as he laps at my cunt.

“Clean her up,” Cy commands him.

Griffin rises when Jay puts a hand on his shoulder. “With your mouth, pet.”

I’m exhausted, but the gleam in his eye reminds me of the last time he had me rocking on his thigh begging, again, to come. How he wanted my pleasure just as much as I did, but wanted me to earn it.

He’s looking at Griffin the same way now. Looking at him in a way telling me Griffin is going to have to work for his own pleasure with this man.

Griffin licks my lower lips with hungry movements. He’s drenched in my and Cy’s combined release, but it doesn’t seem to bother him in the least. He attacks my pussy like a

man in the desert, desperate for nourishment to quench his thirst.

He switches between running his tongue through my slit and cleaning up the insides of my thighs, every time returning to the center of my pleasure.

The way he circles my clit is reverent.

He moves as though I'm the greatest gift he's ever received, but he's not gentle, knowing I can take it. Jay is right there forcing Griffin's face deeper into my cunt as Cy trails kisses up and down my spine.

On Griffin's next pass he hums deeply at my taste and I'm once again thrown into another rolling orgasm. Soft as it is, the feeling is overwhelming and I finally fully collapse my weight on top of him.

"Oh, fuck," Griffin exclaims as I slide down his body, only to land on top of his chastity cage.

The cool metal hits me right on the clit and I cry out in response to the most delightful pain. My oversensitive heated lips against the cool metal surrounding Griffin's cock is the final nail for me. I can't take the aftershocks it sends through me and I'm jerking on his body.

"How many is that, baby?" Jay asks.

"Three? Four?" I attempt as Cy pulls me off of Griffin's lap and into his own arms. "I don't know."

A kiss at the juncture of my neck and jaw draws a sigh out of me.

“You did so good, little girl,” Cy whispers. He directs his next statement to Jay. “I’m going to take her to get cleaned up. You take care of him.”

I imagine Jay nodding in response, but I can’t see him as my eyes droop.

“Baby doll, do you want me to take him out of his cage?” Jay inquires.

My eyes are closing in exhaustion, and I can only manage to shake my head no.

“He’s being punished,” Cy explains. “She told him one full day before she unlocks him.”

“What did he do to deserve that?” Jay laughs.

I hear nothing past that, perfectly content to drift off in Cy’s arms, surrounded by the indistinct murmurs of my men.

Mine.

Broken Hearted Lovers

Jay

I help Griffin rise from the ground as Cy leaves the playroom with Juliana in his arms. He's quiet, his body is relaxed, but his gaze is far away.

"You good?" I ask, holding him up while he gets his feet underneath him.

"Did I do okay?" he asks in a breathless voice.

Oh, this sweet man.

"Of course you did. You did exactly what you were asked," I soothe, brushing back his overgrown hair from his face. "You were such a good boy."

"Mmmm," is all he manages.

Griffin is deep in subspace and, to me, it's an honor to be trusted to help him through it. I don't take it lightly.

His question strikes me, though, like Griffin is doubting his worth. He keeps questioning his place amongst us and in Julia's life. He doesn't seem to realize how much he means to her, and in turn, how much he means to me.

“You wanna go lay down?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He sighs, weariness seeping into his voice.

A few robes hang from hooks above the bench by the door, and I walk over to grab one while giving Griffin a moment to himself. But when I turn back, he’s leaning against the edge of the bed, staring longingly at the empty doorway.

“Come on,” I say, extending my hand to him.

Despite my offer, I’m still surprised when he takes my hand. He gives me a look which makes my whole body feel tingly. He’s so young, and it’s adorable to see him so content. Seeing him open enough to reach for the comfort I’m able to offer is an honor.

“Griffin, can you look at me?” I ask as I guide him up from the bed to stand and handing him the robe to put on.

Fully straightened, he faces me down fully and his eyes are glassy. He’s still lost in the haze of his pleasure.

“Griffin.” I pause, hoping to get his full attention. “I need you to tell me what you need. You can’t just be left alone after all of that.”

He nods lazily but seems to understand my question as he tugs on the robe. I give him his moment of struggle before taking over. I slip one of his arms into the robe and then the other, coming around to the front to tie him in.

“You’re not doin’ too well with words, are ya bud?” I say, reaching up to cup his face.

He gives me a small shake of his head, and a smile spreads across my face.

“Let’s get you upstairs and in the shower, okay?” I extend my hand once again, and he takes it without hesitation.

Griffin leads us all by example, though he doesn’t seem to see it that way. He submits to Julia, but doesn’t seem to understand how strong it makes him. It’s hard to let someone else take care of you. For me, it’s nearly impossible. But Griffin does it with such ease and grace. And to take the simple offer of my help shows the same strength in his vulnerability.

His long strides eat up the distance as we make our way out of the playroom and through the halls. As I follow him, my hand still clasped in his own, I observe the slack in his shoulders and the relaxed nature of his walk. His breathing has evened out by the time we reach his room, across from Julia’s.

Through the open doorway to her room, I spot her curled up on the bed. Cy is above her with a washcloth, cleaning her with the most tender of caresses.

Griffin notices my pause and stops to observe them together as well.

“I think I love her,” he whispers.

The words slur together slightly, and I don’t think he intended for me to hear his confession, but there’s a part of me that knows it can’t go unacknowledged.

“You need her,” I state, seeing the longing written across his expression. “Right now, you need her, don’t you?”

He says nothing, but a flicker of shame, or maybe guilt, flashes across his features.

“No, don’t do that. Ask for what you need,” I command.

When he looks at me, there’s such tenderness in his gaze and a part of me melts.

“Yes. I need her. I’ll always need her,” he confesses.

The truth in his words shines through, and again I see the strength seeming to be the foundation of this man. His willingness to be so honest and open makes him incredible.

It takes me a minute to remember we’re standing in the middle of the hallway, gawking at Cy’s tenderness toward Juliana.

I tug on Griffin’s hand lightly. “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up. Then maybe we just have a puppy pile with her and Cy.”

His nod of confirmation is missing something, though, and I realize he still needs instruction, direction. He’s still in subspace, though a little bit more back to himself, and still needs the direction he craves.

“Go shower. I’ll put out clothes for you.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

I follow him into his bedroom and head for the dresser to find some clothes, and I hear Griffin turning on the shower.

Pulling out a pair of sweatpants and a shirt, I note how soft they are. How soft all his clothes are, but I'm interrupted by the sound of a sob coming from the bathroom.

Throwing down the clothes on the bed, I race into the bathroom. Griffin is on the floor of the shower, water pounding over him, crying.

Oh, you sweet boy.

I don't hesitate before stripping down to my boxers and stepping into the shower with him to gather him in my arms. His sobs roll through his body, and with each gasping breath, he clings tighter to me.

"Let it out, sweet boy. It's okay. You're safe." At my caress down his spine, he thrusts a hand into my hair at the base of my neck to keep me close. His warm tears drop onto my skin as he buries his face into the curve of my neck. "You're not alone. I'm right here."

"I love her," he sobs, and it's a heartbreaking noise to hear.

"I know you do. I know," I murmur.

"But what if she doesn't love me back?" he confesses.

He's completely naked other than the cage around his cock, shaking in my arms and laying everything out for me. He's confessing his fears, telling me his truths, without hesitation. His breathing seems to even a bit as I stroke my fingers through his hair and up and down his bare back, but all I can do is listen and try to reassure him.

“Griffin, I need you to listen to me right now.” I keep my tone soft but firm. “I know what that woman’s love looks like, feels like, and I can tell you without a doubt she loves you.”

He pulls back from me a little, though I keep him firmly pressed to my chest. His bright eyes, swirling with a mix of conflicting emotions, find my own.

“How? How do you know?” he whispers, barely audible over the pounding of the water on the tile floor.

“Stand up. Let me wash you and I’ll tell you.”

I sigh as he complies, my heart breaking at the sadness that’s overtaken him.

I know logically that this is the sub-drop, under different circumstances he wouldn’t be feeling this so harshly. But the thing about drop is it only surfaces the feelings that are already lingering. It only magnifies whatever is already there, good or bad.

“I know because of the way she looks at you,” I say, lathering shampoo in my hands. “When I first saw her again, she was so broken and beat down. I know I helped. I know now she needs me. But she didn’t come back to me fully until she found you again.”

I stretch to reach his hair and he bends down slightly to assist me but keeps his attention on me the entire time as I massage the shampoo into his hair.

“Julia used to wear her heart on her sleeve, but she doesn’t anymore. Not unless she’s with you. When she’s with you, I

see the woman I love again in her entirety. I get to see her on full display. She's fully herself with you." I rinse him as I talk. "She needs you, Griffin. She needs all of us."

We stand in silence as I let my words settle over him while I finish washing his hair. When I reach for the washcloth to clean the rest of him, I stop.

"Griffin."

"Hmmm."

"You want to know how I really know she loves you?" I say, squirting some body wash into the washcloth and prompting him to turn around.

"Of course." He seems to be coming back to himself more with each pass of the cloth across his tattooed skin. He's more awake and his words aren't slurring as much.

"She claimed you as hers," I breathe out the realization.

"What?" His face whips back to me, and his eyes are wide and alert.

"You're hers." I walk around to face him. "She caged you today."

The look of confusion on his face tells me everything I need to know.

"You don't understand what that means, do you?" Griffin shakes his head and little beads of water go flying. "Fuck. She should have explained."

“Explained what? It was part of the game, it’s a punishment.”

“Oh, no. Sweetheart. Chastity requires so much trust. So much loyalty,” I start. “You gave yourself to her freely, right? You wanted her to cage you.”

I reach out to place my fingertips at the spot where his body starts to slope inward, mere inches from the metal cage.

“Of course.” His brow furrows in the most adorable way.

“Griffin, it wasn’t a game she was playing. It’s probably not even a real punishment.”

“I don’t understand.”

I sigh when he drops his gaze to the tiled floor, water dripping from the hair hanging in his face. Tilting his face back up to meet my own, I see the turmoil overtaking him and a pang of guilt zings through me, followed by anger at the situation Juliana has caused.

“She really should be the one explaining this to you. And no matter what you need to talk with her, okay? I’ll make sure of it.”

No matter her intentions, implied consent isn’t enough.

And she knows better.

Worship

JULIANA

I wake up in my bed dressed in a soft purple nightgown, surrounded by Cy's warmth, to the sound of the door clicking closed. As I rise, he tightens his hold on where his hand rests on my thigh but doesn't otherwise move or wake.

Standing in the doorway with light spilling in from the hallway is Griffin. He's clad in gray sweatpants with a dark hooded sweatshirt and his hair is wet from showering. I watch as a single rivulet of water slides down his face, admiring the path it takes along his eyebrow and down his cheek. He looks a little sheepish, but it's Jay who's standing behind him that really grabs my attention.

Jay's hair is also curiously wet, though he's changed out of his suit and is now dressed in dry sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt he's clearly borrowed from Griffin. His expression is measured. If I didn't know him so well, I would think he was perfectly content, but a slight tick in his jaw has me imagining smoke coming out of his ears.

"Griffin. Into bed," he commands gently, giving Griffin a slight nudge on the shoulder. "Julia, follow me."

Jay is turning on his heel before I can fully process his order. Immediately, I'm scrambling out of the bed, though Cy in his slumber does his best to hold me to him. I manage to pry his fingers off my thigh and crawl to the edge of the bed before hopping off to follow Jay.

When I get close to Griffin, I stop him with a hand to his chest, but he won't look at me. "You okay?"

I duck down to place myself in his line of sight and am shaken when he turns his face away from me. Standing back up, my hand slides down to grasp at his own and I hold him there for a second.

"I will be." He shrugs, keeping his gaze on his bare feet.

My hand squeezes tightly around his own, and I nod to him before following Jay into the hallway.

Before I can shut the door, he rips into me, making me jump at his tone. "What the actual fuck, Julia?"

"Woah," I say while fully closing the door behind me. "What is going on?"

I'm met with a brief glare before he's pacing before me. His body is vibrating with energy and it's like waiting for a timer to run out, but not knowing the outcome when it hits zero.

"How the hell do you, *you*, fuck up like this?" he scolds under his breath.

"Jay. Words. Use words," I plead.

Finally, he stops before me and stares at me with a furrowed brow. I see the thoughts and accompanying flashes of emotion cross his mind as he thinks through his argument. He's planning and plotting and, based on his expression, my demise could be imminent.

I start to reach out for him, wanting to soothe whatever it is that's bothering him, but he steps back from me.

"Griffin." He's simmering with frustration and lowers his head before reaching back to lace his fingers behind his neck in frustration. "You caged him and you didn't tell him what that means?"

Everything stops for a moment as I take in his words. My jaw tightens in an automatic reflex, wanting to defend myself. "What? Of course I did," I snap.

He takes a step toward me until we're a breath from touching. Despite the inches I have on him, I feel small. It's like he's looking down at me, scolding me, and doubt clouds my mind.

"Not clearly enough then." He huffs, letting his head drop back. When he returns to meet my gaze, there's only pain there. It's not his own, but the sentiment is so clear in his expression. "I just held him through his sub-drop while he sobbed in the shower."

"What?!" My hands fly up to cover my lips in panic, my eyes widening at the news. "Why?"

"Because he thinks you don't love him."

The words are so simple, but they nearly shatter what remains of my composure.

“No. God no. Jay.” My breathing is rapid as words fall out of my mouth. “I mean, we’ve never said those words to each other, but of course I love him. Fuck.”

I reach for Jay’s hand, bringing it between us and clasping it tightly between my own. My lips rest on his knuckles as adrenaline courses through me.

“What did he say?” I ask urgently, my gaze flicking back to the door behind me and then back to meet Jay’s.

“A lot.” He reaches up with his free hand to cup me by the cheek. I lean into the touch and something in me melts at the contact, slowing the anxiety building in my chest. “The main gist of it is he’s—*spoiler*—in love with you but thinks it’s just physical for you.”

I jerk back and let go of Jay’s hand to get a better look at him but end up knocking into the door by accident.

“No. Of course not. Goddess.” I reach to run my fingers through my hair, stopping at the base of my neck and gripping tightly. “I *caged* him, Jay. I don’t take that lightly.”

“Julia. He’s twenty-six and unexperienced. He’s been undercover since he was twenty-two. Doesn’t exactly leave much time for exploring lifestyle activities. Julia,” he says, resting his hands on his hips like a school teacher right before you’re sent to the principal’s office. “He doesn’t know what caging means.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I murmur, glancing again at the door.

“Now,” Jay spits out.

“Yes, of course now,” I say, turning on my heel and reaching for the door handle.

“Hey, don’t snap at me because you fucked up,” he says, returning my defensive tone.

I can feel him close behind me as I move back into the bedroom and toward the bed. Cy is sitting up now, tucking a blanket around Griffin, who’s curled up into himself on the bed.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

“He started shaking,” Cy states with an even expression.

I’m across the room before he can finish his sentence, crawling into bed and drawing Griffin up into my arms. “Griffin. Oh, goddess, Griffin,” I implore, pulling him into my chest so he’s cradled in the shelter of my body. “I’m so sorry.”

He seems so small in my arms despite his large stature. His trembling form doesn’t shy away from me, though, and I take it as a sign to continue.

“Griffin, I shouldn’t have assumed. I thought you knew, but I should have asked.” Reaching out, I pull his face to look at me.

My heart is pounding. It was oddly simple to confess my feelings to Jay, my best friend and lover, but telling someone

new you love them is a terrifying thing. Even if you know, deep in your soul, they love you back.

“You’re mine, Griffin.” He frowns doubtfully, so I continue. “You’re mine and I’m not letting you go. I love you.”

I kiss him with every emotion that hangs heavy in my heart. He meets me, hesitant at first, but he doesn’t pull back, for which I’m grateful. Soon the kiss grows hot and fervent. I’m sinking into the feeling of his soft lips against mine. Protectiveness surges through me as I capture him close to my body.

We’re devouring each other.

When I feel hot tears streaming down his face, I reach to wipe them away. I’m kissing the tracks of his tears, his cheeks, his jaw and neck. Every inch of this man is mine, and I need him to understand what this means.

Finally, he pulls me toward him, wrapping his arms around me and tucking his head underneath my chin. He clings like he’ll never let me go. And I don’t ever want him to.

“I love you. All of you.” I say, meeting Griffin’s gaze first, then Jay, then Cy. “It’s not equal because it can’t be measured. It’s not logical because it’s like magic. It doesn’t make any kind of sense, it just is. I love y’all irrationally.”

Cy’s eyes widen at my confession, but Jay just looks smug. It’s Griffin, though, my attention draws back to. “I’m so sorry if I ever made you think otherwise, Griffin.”

He takes a moment to gather himself as I hold his face in my hands, but when he speaks, it makes my heart glow. “I love you, too, Jules. So much it hurts.”

“No, sweetheart. No. It shouldn’t. I’m sorry I made it hurt, but that’s not how I want it to be.” I pull him close once again and nestle his face into the curve of my neck so I can feel his breath against my skin. “Griffin, I never want to hurt you. Ever. And if I do, I’ll do everything in my power to make it up to you. You’re part of my heart, and it would break mine to see yours broken, too.”

Thawed from his frozen shock, Cy gets up and heads to the door.

I know I just dropped a lot on him, and I’m worried as fuck about his reaction, but I need to be here right now for Griffin.

He seems to notice my worry and comes back to my side of the bed, placing a delicate kiss to my hair. “Later,” Cy murmurs before heading out of the room.

I look at Jay, who’s still standing by the doorway with a smug, knowing look on his face.

“Get over here, asshole,” I grunt.

Dutifully, Jay crawls into bed next to me and places a kiss on my cheek.

“I love you,” I tell him.

“I love you more.” I open my mouth to reply, but he cuts me off. “Don’t fight me, baby doll. I love you.”

I nod in acceptance and turn my attention back to the man in my arms, the man I love. The man who is also drifting to sleep.

Shifting us both, I position myself so Griffin is wrapped around me, his head resting against my breast.

“Griffin.” He hums in response. “Griffin, I need you to answer me honestly.”

“Yeah,” he mumbles.

“Do you want to be caged? Are you really okay with this?” I say, running my fingers through his hair.

I appreciate him thinking on it for a moment. Makes me hella nervous, but I’m glad he’s taking the question seriously.

“I think so. No, yes. Yes. I want this.” He looks up at me. “I want you, always.”

I place a kiss on his forehead and connect with Jay, who’s grinning wickedly over Griffin’s shoulder.

“Griffin? Do you know what collaring means?” I keep my eyes on Jay, letting him know how serious I am about this.

“Kind of,” he replies.

I take a deep breath. “It’s a sign of commitment. It means partners have agreed to belong to each other in a sense. One wears a collar, and the other holds the key. It’s a little like getting married.”

His body tenses, and it takes everything in me to not ramble but instead I give him the time to process.

“Okay. That makes sense.” He snuggles further into me and my heart warms.

“Would you be open to that?” Jay laces his fingers through my own, where they rest on Griffin’s hip. “Would you want that with me? You don’t have to decide now, though.”

“Yes.” The lack of pause and conviction in his answer makes my heart leap with joy. “But...”

“But what?” I ask hesitantly.

“But maybe later? I’m kinda tired right now.”

“Oh, sweetheart. Not right now, but later. Only if you want.”

“I want,” he yawns, sinking into my body. “I want you. Always.”

Trouble

sage

I was probably at the hospital for far too long before I was forced to go home, with a quick stop at the store to stock up on groceries. I prefer the loud chaos of my emergency room. Now that I am home, though, I'm on edge. I had never heard the firehouse so quiet before.

Even just the brief trips home between shifts to shower, sleep, and change were filled with the noises of five other people going about their business. But now, there are no grunts coming from the gym or gunshots from the range. The hallways are empty, and upon entering the kitchen, I find it void of Griffin's normal baking carnage.

The quiet is unsettling.

"Where is everyone?" I say, walking to the island with my hands overloaded with bags.

Rummaging through the bags, I find the pack of strawberry licorice and tear into it. I bite into the first strand, but it only sends a pang of guilt through me at the memory of how Kieran likes to tear his apart and eat them strand by strand.

I push down the tears threatening to well in my eyes and focus on emptying the bags before me instead. Only I am met with the sight of everything that reminds me of my son.

Small tangerines, strawberry superhero toaster pastries, popcorn, and organic mac and cheese cover the counter. I hurry to put it all away, to push the memory of him back into the box keeping me safe from breaking apart. But in the pantry and fridge, I am confronted by more of him and the things he loves. I am breathing heavily by the time I shove the final box of popcorn onto the shelf, amongst four others accumulating recently and subsequently forgotten.

Now finished, I return to the island just as Ember walks into the kitchen.

“Oh, hey! You’re back,” they exclaim, stopping briefly in the doorway as they take on the sight of me panting and holding back tears before proceeding carefully. “We... we weren’t sure when we would see you again.”

“Ember, where is everyone?” I breathe out heavily, trying to collect myself.

“Mhmm... probably sleeping. It’s been a whirlwind while you’ve been gone.” There’s a playful glint in their eye as they speak, and a smirk finds its way onto their face.

“In what way?” I ask.

“Picture a ‘Naughty in New Orleans’ style fuck fest. Part of me thinks we’ve all been drugged, but I think we’re all just letting off steam.” They laugh.

“I am not sure I know what that means... and I am not sure I want to know.”

Ember takes a few steps to meet me across the island where my hands tightly grip the edge. “What? Naughty in New Orleans? Yeah, maybe not.”

“So are they all upstairs?” I inquire, glancing up to the ceiling as though I have X-ray vision.

“Yup,” they say, grabbing an energy drink from the pantry—not their first based on the contents of the trash. “Last I checked in, Cy and Juliana were in her room and Jay was with Griffin in his.”

“You weren’t with them?” I cock my head to the side, curious why they would have separated from the others.

The crack of the can startles me into a small jump, and Ember studies me carefully. I am sure I look a wreck in my rumpled scrubs, day old makeup, and day four hair.

“Nah. I... I was busy...” Their pause is concerning. “I got into the security system.”

“What?” I shove off the counter and practically race around the island to meet Ember head-on.

“I found Kieran,” they say quietly as I take them by the hand.

Every emotion I have had pent up for the last weeks rolls through me all at once. All the anger at Arrick, my fear and guilt, all of it comes crashing down, and it is suffocating.

“You found him and you didn’t call me?” I take slow deliberate breaths, trying to slow things down, trying not to jump to conclusions.

“I did call. A lot. And I called the hospital. You didn’t get any of that, though, did you?” Their pierced eyebrow quirks up.

”*You* were the personal call the nurses kept telling me about?”

“I mean yeah. I figured you’d want to know.” They shrug.

“No fucking kidding, Ember!” I lash out. I’m at the edge of collapse and everything feels exhausting. Just standing here is difficult, and I slump back against the island. But the need to see my child is overwhelming. “Show me. Now.”

Ember turns, taking quick, sure strides out of the room. I follow them to their shared office space and my eye immediately catches on one of the computer monitors.

“Oh, my goddess.” I breathe deeply, trying to calm myself as Ember sits down at the computer and enlarges the video’s window on the screen.

There on the screen is Kieran, sitting on a cot in what looks like an office. He’s wrapped himself in a green blanket that is clearly not soft enough to soothe him. His little toes peek out from underneath as he rocks himself side to side slightly.

The room itself is concrete and steel. A drain is at its center, surrounded by a menacing, dark stain. It looks cold and threatening.

“His hair is longer,” I say as he tugs at it, clearly frustrated. He lets the blanket drop from one of his shoulders, and the redness of faint scratch marks are made visible. “Oh, goddess. Kieran.”

“He’s been doing okay, I think,” Ember interjects in a pitiful attempt to soothe me. “I’ve only had the feed for a couple of hours, but he’s seemed pretty good considering.”

Tears are running down my face as I watch my brave little boy on the screen.

“He’s not okay. He’s not,” I say. “He’s tugging at his hair and squinting his eyes shut because he’s overwhelmed. His hair is too long and the lights are too bright. He’s probably cold, too.”

Ember looks at me in amazement, and I can’t help but grimace through my tears at them.

“There are scratch marks on his arm. *Scratch marks,*” I whine.

Without words, some silent communication passes between us, and Ember turns back to the monitors.

“Here’s everything I know.”

It takes a couple hours—mostly because I keep having to snatch energy drinks out of Ember’s hands and get them to slow down and simplify—but when Ember finishes going through everything with me, I’m back to being overwhelmed.

“So what you are saying is there is no way to get him out,” I say, defeated, hands shaking with rage.

“Between the new security system, guard shifts, and just sheer hardware on the door to the room Kieran’s in? Yeah. We’d have better luck robbing the Houston Museum of Fine Arts.”

“Fuck,” I say, holding back more tears threatening to spill over onto my already damp cheeks and digging my nails into my palm to the point of pain.

Why does everything have to be so *hard*?

I have spent every moment I am not at the hospital or asleep collecting things for Kieran, just trying to stay connected to him somehow. Trying to keep him close.

The pantry is stocked with all of his favorite foods and even more of his safe foods. I brought over all of his blankets and stuffed animals, plus a couple new Squishmallow acquisitions. His bedding has been washed with his favorite scented detergent—for sensitive skin, of course—and I have cleaned nearly every inch of his room, trying to make it a welcoming environment for him.

Every moment when I am at the hospital is just a desperate attempt at trying not to worry about him, but he’s constantly in my thoughts.

I just want him *home*.

After seeing him in that room, I know he will not be my same little boy I last saw.

I know trauma and, as much as I want to protect him from it, his nine-year-old brain isn't able to handle this.

As I watch him on Ember's screen, he doesn't look hurt or injured beyond the redness on his arms, but there's a haunting look in his eyes telling me he's scared. Which means his father has been less than kind to him.

I truly don't think Arrick would ever physically hurt Kieran, but I don't think he knows how to take care of him, not like I do.

The way Arrick sees it, our family is an extension of his pride and any fault or blemish on his image isn't acceptable. It is why we left. He finally broke when my good perception of him shattered. Arrick could not take us knowing who he truly is, and he resorted to violence, but only toward me. Kieran was safe from that.

But not anymore.

"Ember, what *can* we do?" I plead.

I'm still staring at the screens before me, but I feel the pity wafting off of them.

"Until we figure out how to get Arrick out of the way... nothing," they respond quietly.

"What do we need to do to get him away from my son?" I am reaching, but it is the only thing I can hope will keep me from falling apart.

Ember considers my question as I stand there, my heart in agony over the situation. I can see the way they are puzzling

through the situation. How they're putting all the pieces of information we know together to find a way through this.

"I think we need more answers," they finally reply.

"Answers to what?"

"From someone close to Arrick."

"From Griffin? He's given us everything, hasn't he?"

"No. Not Griffin." They turn to face me fully. "We need answers from the man we have locked up."

I stare at them in shock.

"He's still locked up?" I exclaim. "It's been months, right?"

"First, your perception of time is totally fucked up. No way it's been months. Weeks, maybe? Idk... I'm bad at time too." They turn toward me and rise to meet me head-on. "But, I mean... yeah. What did you think we were going to do with the guy who came after Juliana?"

"I don't know, Ember. Maybe turn him over to the police?" I back away slightly, trying to find air in the room that just won't come.

"Well, we couldn't do that. So he's here." They harrumph petulantly. There's no guilt or remorse in their expression, and while my immediate reaction is outrage and confusion, there seems to contain more understanding from them, as though this is the most rational decision to make.

"I want to see him," I demand, my shoulders relaxing now that my mind is made up.

“No. You really don’t,” Ember warns with a cringe.

“I want to see him,” I repeat with more force this time.

“Sage, you still have a moral compass with this kind of stuff. You really don’t want to see him.” They take a step toward me again, but I’m already turning to leave.

“Not with this, I do not.”

Cravin'

cy

Hearing Juliana say she loves me? It both thrills and terrifies me.

So, I left.

Like normal, I left. I ran as quickly as I could from anything that could remotely be interpreted as feelings shit. I hate myself for it, but I don't do big emotions well, and I learned a long time ago it's easier to retreat from them rather than face them.

This time, I'm retreating to the office I share with Ember. Blue light spills out from under the door as I reach for the handle and open it, not expecting to see Sage standing over Ember staring at the screens mounted to the wall.

My gaze follows their own up to the monitors where my eyes land on the image of a little boy—Kieran—tightly curled up in a blanket on a green military cot. Flashes of memories cross my mind of young children in similar situations from when I was overseas. Only, this image sends a throb of soul-crushing guilt through me.

“Oh! Cy,” Ember exclaims as I enter and shut the door behind me.

Sage is too focused to turn to me fully, but a slight swivel of her head in my direction is acknowledgement enough. A brief glimpse of her face has my fists clenching at my side.

“What the fuck? Why didn’t you tell me you got into their security system again?” I scold.

“You were a little... um... busy at the time.”

Embarrassment floods me but I push it down. I have nothing to be ashamed of. Sex isn’t something to be sorry for. And if Ember has taught me anything, it’s that caring about people isn’t either. So what if my heart is caught up in a million strings, twisted up in the emotions Juliana’s left me with?

“Fine. But catch me up,” I snap, opting for harsh words instead of caving to softer feelings.

Standing over Ember, I place my hands on their shoulders, rubbing out the tension that’s found its way into their muscles. I knead at their neck as they fill me in on the details of how they hacked back into Arrick’s security system—and mentally subtract from the list of favors we’ve called in since the beginning of all this mess.

Not that it’s not worth it, but because I fear we’re running out of options.

I watch Sage out of the corner of my eye, gathering clues to her feelings as Ember talks. She’s staring at the image of her son, looking so fuckin’ lost. But there’s also a simmering rage

underneath I can relate to. I like the kid. Kieran's one of the good ones, and it hurts to have him apart from us, but it's more painful to see how broken down everyone is because of it.

"Sage knows about the monster we're keeping in our closet," Ember says, drawing my full attention back to them.

"Griffin and Jay's pet project?" I ask.

They nod.

"I thought you all had turned him over to the police." Sage sighs softly. "I did not realize he was still here. We should have rid our hands of him."

"After what he did? There's no way Jay and Griffin were gonna let that go." I pause, taking in her slumped shoulders and tight jaw. Every part of her body is warring with itself and I want to hug her—fuck, I'm getting soft.

"That's what happens when no one sees you for more than a minute all week," Ember sing-songs.

A new determination takes over Sage's posture as she turns to us fully for the first time.

Her posture relaxes and determination takes over, her features schooling themselves into a carefully blank expression. "I want to see him," she demands.

I glance down at Ember quickly before making up my mind. My options are to take her to him or attempt to keep her away. There's no doubt in my mind Sage is going to hate this, but it would be easy enough for her to find the guy in the red room

on her own. So when it comes down to it... the only thing I can do is drag her further down the path to Hell.

“I’ll grab the guys.”

Griffin was still tightly caught up in Juliana’s hold when I reached her bedroom, but Jay was up, stroking Juliana’s hair as he watched the pair sleep. At my entrance, he looks up at me with a quirked brow. I motion for him to follow me, and he’s slow to leave them but joins me in the hallway.

“What’s up?” he dives in.

“The basics? Ember hacked into the security system. Sage wants to see our new friend for herself.”

Jay’s brow scrunches at the request. “She doesn’t want to see that.”

“Not my decision,” I say, turning on my heel to go back to them with a glance over my shoulder. “You comin’?”

He stalls out for a minute as he tries to mentally catch up before jumping into action. “Yeah, yeah. Let me grab shoes.”

He dips back into Juliana’s room—their room—before following me down to the office where I left Sage and Ember.

I open the door to find Sage slumped over in the chair across from Ember.

“Cy’s back with Jay,” they say, nudging Sage to look at us in the doorway.

Immediately, she springs up and crosses over to Jay. “Let me see him,” she pleads with him. “Please.”

Jay studies her for a moment, taking in the same determination I saw in her earlier and coming to the same conclusion I did.

“Alright. But on one condition.” He gives nothing away in his expression, keeping everything completely neutral.

“Anything.” Her eyes are bright with anticipation, though now a little red rimmed from crying.

“You can’t save him,” Jay states.

At that, she seems taken aback. “Save him?” she says incredulously. “Why would I save him?”

Jay takes a step toward her and takes her by the hand. “It’s your nature. You’re a caretaker, a doctor for goodness sake, Sage. You’re gonna want to patch him up, mend his wounds.” He pauses briefly to make sure she’s following along. “But you can’t touch him, tend to him. You cannot help him. Not at all. He needs to suffer for what he did.”

She’s nodding along as Jay explains and, without hesitation, she agrees and we all turn to leave, Ember close behind.

When we arrive at the red room, though, it’s Jay hesitating in front of the door.

“You’re sure?” He glances over his shoulder to look at the good doctor.

“Yes,” she assures him, blankness taking over her features. Her shoulders are back and she’s clearly bracing herself for the worst, but nothing in her demeanor says there’s any shred of doubt for her about this.

Opening the door, Jay reveals a bloodied and bruised man. This man threatened Juliana, and he shot Jay. He deserves our worst, and he’s going to get it.

“Oh my goddess,” Sage gasps. She steps forward, but I catch her by the shoulder to stop her from getting any closer. The man seems to be asleep, and it will be the last he gets for a while.

Jay and Griffin got a good start on the guy, but I don’t doubt the minute they get back to it, he’s a dead man. His body is already littered with cuts and bruises, all evidence of the pain the pair have begun to put him through. He has a split lip, swollen eyes, and is struggling for breath.

I’ve known Jay has a darker side. He has no problem letting go and embracing his inner demons, but Griffin’s been more of a puzzle. Griffin doesn’t seem like the kind of kid who would go into law enforcement. He doesn’t have the rough personality you would expect from someone who’s spent four years undercover, but seeing his reaction to Juliana being threatened brought out a tougher side than I’d seen from him before.

“What do we need from him?” she asks, turning with a chilling calm across her face to Jay, who looks to Ember and me for answers.

“Anything he’ll give us. Mostly on security measures for the compound,” Ember chimes in.

I add, “But anything about Arrick and what he’s up to will help.”

There’s an intensity to Sage showing her commitment to the cause. Resolve settles over her as she finishes wrestling with herself. She’s ready.

“What can I do?” she asks.

There’s no turning back. Not for any of us.

“We need him to stay alive. Long enough to keep him talking. We need him pliable, open to suggestion,” Jay supplies.

“I can help.” Silence envelopes us as we wait for her to continue. “I can patch him up if things go too far. How much do you know about the skeletal, muscle, and nervous systems?”

“Uhh... not much?” Jay looks a little taken aback at her reaction.

That was not the reaction I expected. I thought she would rage or tell us off. I thought her response would be visceral and judgmental, but instead, her temperament and focused gaze give me a different insight. That kind of determination is respectable.

It’s the kind that keeps you alive.

“I will get you some diagrams. It will help with knowing what will be most effective as you go,” she continues. “I need to know what the plan is for him. And supplies from the hospital.”

“Ash or Rosie can get supplies. They know enough people to track down what you need. Jay and Griffin can fill you in on the rest.” I nod toward Jay.

In the harsh lighting, she looks fierce. She’s fully embracing the mama bear I know she tries to hide from us.

“Where is Griffin?”

“Upstairs with Juliana,” I reply. “He’s asleep.”

“Alright, well. I’ll finish putting things away in the kitchen and wait for him to get up. Then we go from there.” As she talks, a to-do list seems to formulate in Sage’s mind.

“How are you so calm about all this?” I ask, truly wanting to understand how a woman committed to helping people—do no harm and all that—can now suddenly just roll with torturing someone for information and potentially being part of their death.

Her blue eyes search my own, and she opens and closes her mouth several times before replying.

“I... it... Kieran. I will do anything for him. I am not a naïve little girl, Cy. I know what you and Ember do. I know what Jay’s done, too,” she says, motioning to the man in question. Then she straightens herself to her full height. “I may not have known the full extent of Griffin’s role with my

husband before, but I do now. And if this is what it takes then so be it. I am all in.”

Her stride is confident as she walks out of the room as our trio sits with her words.

All in.

Juliana told me she loved me, and I walked away.

But I’m done with running, done hiding.

I guess I’m all in, too.

Aimed To Kill

Jay

It's been four days since Sage informed us she wanted to help Griffin and me with Kutter's demise. She goes in and out of the firehouse for her shifts, but each time she returns with a new present for us—some medication she swiped, a new set of scalpels, or whatever she thinks would be helpful, even if they aren't. It's sweet how she thinks of us enough to bring home presents. But with each day I can see how she's straining against her instincts. They're screaming at her to care and nurture, but her instinct to protect Kieran overpowers her logic.

This is necessary.

She promised to help us keep him alive, barely. Early on she set up an IV to keep him from passing out too often. She's stitched up a couple wounds that went too deep and were bleeding too much, but she's made no comment about the rest of the wounds I've laid across his body. Instead, she's opted for an educator role—teaching me where and when to cut to be more effective, just as she promised. Not a word is said about the sickly look about Kutter that comes with being poisoned,

though Griffin has since abandoned the endeavor—fueled by his mounting anger—and opted for his fists instead. His rage at his former friend quickly overtook any rational plans we made, and the good guy versus bad guy charade was thrown out faster than a bat out of hell.

She's done and said nothing to outwardly show she has any objection to what we're doing, though I can tell it's there.

But it's for her son.

Kutter has been minimally helpful. He cracked within days of us returning to our torment and gave up all the security information we would ever need for the compound. All the upgrades and changes since Griffin split, too. We already had an in through Ember to their security feed, but now we're armed with personnel counts, guard schedules, artillery inventories. Everything we could need to know to storm the place, he's given us.

The one thing he's held onto, though, is Arrick's plan, his motives. What the man really wants out of all of this. Or maybe Kutter simply doesn't know.

If he does know anything, he's close to breaking, shattering. I can see it in how he flinches every time someone comes in the room and how his groans have turned into whimpers. But for him to tell us everything, we still have to find the right trigger.

I study the man before me while twirling a scalpel between my fingers—another new gift from Sage. He's long since

given up on looking afraid. The fear is there, I know, but the shock is gone. He knows what to expect now.

And we can't have that.

With that thought, I drop the scalpel so it clatters on the metal table and storm out of the room to go upstairs, hoping someone is there to talk through it with.

Before I get to the stairs, I hear clanging coming from the kitchen, followed by a soft curse.

“You okay, man?” I ask hesitantly as I enter the kitchen and spot Griffin.

“Mhm. Yeah, fine. Just dropped the bowl,” he mumbles.

I note the state of the kitchen and, like the man standing in its center, the room is in shambles. Supplies litter the counters, ingredients are haphazardly placed, and Griffin himself looks a wreck.

“Nah, man. You're not okay,” I say.

He hasn't looked at me since I walked into the room. He's focused on the task at hand, completely ignorant of the icing on his cheek to the point where the tip of his tongue is peeking out from the side of his mouth in concentration.

Thinking I just need to get him talking, I ask, “What are you making?”

“What?” he responds, a little dazed. “Oh. Yeah, um, gluten-free cinnamon rolls for Jules.”

“Ah.” I chuckle. “You’re not jerking off into them, are you?”

“What? No! Of course not.” His horrified expression finally gets him to look up at me.

“I’m just sayin’ that icing looks a lot like cum.” I let out a full-bodied laugh.

“Oh, fuck off,” he mumbles, but at least he’s engaging again.

“Okay, really man. What’s up?”

He sighs one of those deep sighs that shudders through you and sends a chill to your bones. “It’s been almost a week.”

Ah, Kutter.

“And?” I prompt.

“I don’t think he has anything more he can tell us, Jay. I really don’t. It’s doubtful Arrick trusts him that much. And, honestly?” He sighs again. “I don’t think the guy would pick up on the important stuff even if Arrick laid it all out for him.”

Griffin’s probably right. From everything we’ve seen, Kutter is just muscle. He’s not the brains, only the brawn.

“I was just with him.” Griffin looks at me again, hope in his eyes. “Nothing.”

“See?” Griffin exclaims.

Griffin goes back to icing his cinnamon rolls, and I start picking up around him.

We work in silence, knowing he needs time to process. He's a stress baker and it's his way to work through things. The entire time we're comfortable in our companionship but uncomfortable with the heavy weight of knowing we're at a point of powerlessness.

Everything comes back to life, though, when we hear Julia's laughter from down the hall.

She enters the room in all her athleisure glory with the others behind her. She immediately goes to Griffin to place a kiss on his forehead. She starts to turn to me but, seeming to pick up on his off off-kilter disposition, she stops and faces Griffin with the full force of her attention.

"What's wrong?" The room falls quiet at her sharp tone.

I smirk at how sure she is, how sure she's become.

In the weeks since the fire at Bliss, Julia's started coming back to herself. She's more confident in herself and her direction. Every once in a while I have the privilege to see her embrace herself fully. Right now, she is entirely in her element.

"Nothing," he replies.

"Liar," I joke.

Griffin's glare is unfamiliar on his face, and I can't help but laugh at how out of place it looks.

Julia guides his face to look at her own and he relaxes. The way they gaze at each other with such reverence and respect is

enthraling. He's only a few years younger than us both, but he seems so much younger with the way he melts into her hold.

"Tell me," she prompts.

Everyone in the room tenses in their own way in the silence of the moment. Cy retreats closer to the door, Ember starts to fiddle with their phone, Sage has started cleaning the countertops of the mess Griffin has made. But Julia? Juliana just stands firm and constant before him.

"We think... I think we've hit the end of the road with Kutter." He tries to avert his gaze from Julia, but she won't let him. "I think we need to move on."

Julia's face flashes with rage and Griffin flinches at the sudden change in her demeanor.

"No. I'm not angry with you, Griffin." Her thumb grazes back and forth across his cheek, comforting him as she speaks. "I'm angry at this whole fucking situation. We know just enough to be informed, but not enough to do anything."

"There has to be another way," Sage interjects, her desperation shining through despite her controlled voice.

Cy jumps in from the doorway, one foot in and the other out of the room. "If he hasn't broken for you two, there's nothing more I could really add."

"You are a brutal motherfucker, though. Don't you ever forget that, babe," I say mockingly to him. Cy just glares at me.

Julia connects with Cy over her shoulder, still holding onto Griffin, and they have some silent conversation before she's turning out of the kitchen. We all share a confused moment looking at each other before racing after her.

Cy is on her heels with a knowing smirk on his lips, which makes no sense. There's no way he knows where her head is at. *I don't know where her head is at right now.*

In all the time I've known Julia, she's always worn her heart on her sleeve and thoughts on her face. She's never tried to hide anything, but recently that has changed. She's not cold or closed off to us, but she is more guarded with herself. She's more protective of herself.

My eyebrows shoot to the sky when she turns into the artillery room.

"What are you doing?" I ask, concerned for where this is headed.

My question is met with silence as she unlocks her gun from its case and starts to load the magazine. When she finishes, she picks up the instrument and pulls back the slide to check the chamber for a bullet.

Seeing how comfortable she's become with a gun in her hand is hot as fuck, but the cool of her expression is concerning.

"Baby. What are we doing?" I ask again.

"Not you." She looks up at me this time. "Me."

Leaving the room without as much of a glance behind her, she heads for the red room.

The door slams open as she enters, startling the man in the chair out of his daze.

He's really not in good condition. We went at him with everything we had, but it hasn't been enough. Which is frustrating in itself, but more concerning is the rage appearing in his eyes when he focuses on Julia.

I could rip out his throat for looking at her.

Thrusting the gun under his chin, she cages him in with her body and lords over him.

Her ass looks amazing with how she's angled over him. The determination in her posture, the confidence with which she holds herself has me tensing for a whole different reason.

"This is your last chance to tell us, Kutter." Her voice is pure venom.

She doesn't blink when he spits in her face, but I see the moment when she snaps.

Before any of us can react, she's pulled back, flipped the gun's safety off, cocked and aimed it, and let off a shot that hits him straight in the head.

She turns to all of us calm as ever, blood and brain matter splattered across her face.

"What?" she says casually, like she didn't just end someone's life for the first time. "I'm not interested in being

treated like that and he wasn't going to give us anything more."

I push past Cy and take her face between my hands, wiping away some of the carnage on her face with my thumb. Anger is still rolling off of her taut body in droves, but she softens ever so slightly under my touch.

I search her gaze for the shattering realization of what she's done that I know will come, but I don't see it in her eyes. I see raging fire and lust instead.

Then, I'm on her, kissing her hard, before I fully process what's happened.

God, she's hot.

First Blood

JULIANA

I 'm shaking, but Jay's kiss is slowly grounding me.
I've never killed someone before.

I don't really know what came over me, but standing in the kitchen, it was like every fiber of me knew what had to be done. My hands itched to hold a weapon—and his life—in my hands. It was inevitable.

Everything happened so quickly after the fire, but things have been dragging for too long. Jay and Griffin did their best to get Kutter to spill Arrick's plan to no avail, through no fault of their own.

Gaining the details of the compound and security measures notwithstanding, I could see the pervasive feeling of failure when I looked at Griffin. Hearing him sound so defeated sparked a rage in me. It sent me over the edge and I needed to do something, anything, with the unleashed energy building in me.

It's not enough, though. Even now, kissing Jay, I'm on the edge of some big unnamable feeling and wanting more. More

bloodshed, more action, just more.

Jay deepens the kiss. He grabs me by the back of the neck, allowing me to melt into him.

A cough with Cy's distinct deep rumble interrupts us. "Not to interrupt your moment, but what the fuck?"

Sage grabs a towel from somewhere, wets it, and starts wiping the carnage from my face while Cy takes the gun from my hand and unloads it. Griffin and Ember stand in the doorway with looks of equal shock and admiration.

"Darling, are you okay?" Sage asks as she drags the cloth across my cheek.

"Yeah?" I say, taking stock of my body and emotions but finding nothing out of place. "Yeah. I'm good."

Sage looks at me skeptically. "Why don't we get you cleaned up and have you lie down."

The concern in her voice has my anger raging again. "No," I snap. "No. I'm tired of being treated as fragile. I'm tired of losing all the time. I want this over with."

"Darling, you are angry. Your anger is valid, but there are other ways," Sage says as she continues to run the cool cloth over my face and down my neck. "We will find another way."

Her glance to the dead man sends a spike of fear through me. What if she's horrified of me now? I shake myself from the thought, refusing to believe the liar in my head feeding me doubt. "No. I'm done with finding other ways. I want to go after his throat."

I think about all the people Arrick has hurt and how much damage he's caused. I want to vomit and scream. Arrick tormented Sage and took Kieran. He's the reason Jay was shot and in the hospital. He's the fucking reason Griffin was so isolated for four years. And he's the whole reason Cy and Ember got dragged into this in the first place.

"Arrick is done fucking with my family." I face everyone in the room. "I want to throw everything at him and see what makes him fall fastest."

Armor seems to fold around everyone and I can't help but admire how quick these people are to jump to help me, to defend me. I've never had that before in my life—outside of Jay's consistent presence.

Going through life feeling like you're the only one who can fight your battles is exhausting. Meeting Jay was the first time I ever felt as though someone was truly on my side. Before, everyone in my life had demanded my love and loyalty, but had no interest in returning the sentiment.

Looking at Jay and Griffin, Sage, Cy, and Ember are different, though. They're truly here, present, for me. *Me*.

"What are you thinking, darling?" Sage draws me out from my thoughts.

"I think we need to call in reinforcements." I turn to look at Ember, who already has their phone out, ready for anything. "Reach out to Rosie and Ash. We can't do this on our own and they're a good place to start."

“Oh, hell yeah,” Jay chimes. “Rosie’s list of contacts is ridiculous at this point. And her stalking skills are probably only second to you, Ember.”

A huff of laughter draws my attention back to Cy.

“Flower girl at it again,” he says.

Ember thwacks him in the shoulder before returning to typing on their phone screen. “Rosie will be here in a couple hours,” they reply, still looking at their phone. “She’s coming from the Woodlands. Ash will *also* be here around then.” Their eyes are sparkling with knowing mischief. “Ash said she’d call the cleaners for all of this, so that’s taken care of, too.”

I look back at the man whose head I’ve just blown off and take in the carnage I’ve left around us. The red of his blood and body stick to the red cinderblock walls, but they don’t fade in like you’d expect. Instead, it’s like they’ve created a mosaic on the wall, a piece of art screaming at you to pay attention to my anger... and fear.

I don’t regret any of it. There isn’t time, and I don’t have the bandwidth to deal with those feelings right now. I’m grasping onto the adrenaline pumping through my body and the rage fueling me.

I don’t know how, or why, we’ve waited for so long. It makes me sick to my stomach thinking of Kieran trapped with his father. The mental image of what he did to me colors my fear so darkly. Sage says he would never hurt his own son, but I’ve been at the hands of his monster, and I don’t doubt that with the right motivation, the man would pull any trigger.

Nothing would stop him.

Too bad I'm feeling trigger happy myself.

"Jules?" Griffin asks from just beyond the doorway.

Tension that gripped Griffin for the past week appears to have slipped away with the death of his friend—former friend. All I see is relief in his posture. He's the only one who hasn't moved since we entered the room, and my nails dig painfully into my palm at the thought he might be appalled by what I just did.

When he takes a single step toward me and holds out his hand, my fears abate.

"Come on. We should get you cleaned up," he says softly.

Hesitating for a moment, I take stock of the rest of the room and tears well in my eyes.

"Let me take care of you, Jules," he whispers.

Taking his hand, I follow him out of the room and down the hallway. His steps are slower than normal. There's no urgency driving him. He's calm and steady, and I'm grateful for his grounding presence.

"Griffin," I stop him as we reach the bottom of the stairs. "I'm gonna be okay."

He stills on the bottom step and turns back to me. "I know that. But this is what I can do for you right now. Eventually, it's going to hit you and knock the wind out of your lungs. So just let me. Please?"

A small tug up the stairs gets us moving again, but my thoughts are starting to swim. I don't notice my surroundings until we're in the comfort of my room upstairs.

A feeling of safety wraps around me as we enter my space, and I marvel at how much this place has become home for me. Spencer is curled up with his paws tucked under his head, sleeping on my bed, but only acknowledges our presence with the shift of his eyes and a tiny double thump of his tail before going back to sleep.

Griffin ushers me through the room and into the bathroom. There he lets go of my hand and goes to the shower, setting the water at a perfect temperature before ushering me under the falling water. Then he goes back into the bedroom.

Red slides down my body for a few minutes before I can bring myself to actually wash myself. I manage to get myself clean, but through the whole process my body starts to droop, feeling heavier and heavier until I can't bring myself to move anymore and I'm just standing beneath the pounding water.

My first tear falls as Griffin enters with a stack of clothing and, at the pathetic sight of me, pulls me out of the shower to wrap me in a towel.

I let him dry me off with soft strokes before he wrings out most of the water in my hair. He sits me down at the vanity and grabs my brush and hairdryer, then begins to blow out my blonde hair. The drone of the dryer keeps us from talking, but the quiet between us is comforting. Just having him near me is reassuring.

He won't leave because things get hard. I know that with my whole being now.

When Griffin's finished with my hair, he dresses me in soft clothes and leads me to the bed where Spencer dozes. He picks me up with ease and settles me in the bed, where he's already turned down the bedding, before climbing in himself. He turns on the TV and, without asking, settles on a romantic comedy.

"Tell me something good?" I ask quietly.

For a while, the only sound in the room is the movie's dialogue, and with his arm wrapped around me, I start to melt into him.

"My abuela. She taught me to bake. Anytime something went wrong, we would bake. When I was little it was the less important stuff like scraping my knee or a kid making fun of me at school." I can feel him smile at the memory even if I can't see it, but then he grows quiet and places a kiss on my hair, snuggling closer to me. "But when my sister got sick... it became a lifeline for us. For a long time it was the only good thing we had."

My heart breaks for the little boy who went through so much. It's more than a child should be asked to handle on their own. More than *anyone* should be forced to endure.

"We baked hundreds of cupcakes, cookies, and brownies for the hospital staff. A nurse would casually mention they liked lemon bars and on our way home from the hospital, we would stop at the grocery store. The next day, there were lemon bars at the nurse's desk."

He goes quiet as he gets lost in the memories, all the while running his hand lightly up and down my arm, comforting me just like he knows I need.

“It’s the best memory I have from that time. The time spent with Abuela in the kitchen? I’ll treasure it forever. And mi hermanita, Angela, it was the only time she smiled in the end.”

“Griffin, I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine how painful it must have been.” I move to look up at him and there are tears in his eyes, just like mine.

“No, preciosa, it’s a good thing. A lot of memories fade after you lose someone. *That’s* hard. But the good memories you’re able to hang onto? That’s the most beautiful thing I could ask for.”

I pull myself up and turn to face him. “Preciosa? You’ve never called me that before.”

Reaching with his hand to grasp my own, he looks deeply into my eyes with his golden gaze. “Since the moment I first saw you, that’s what you’ve been to me. My treasure. My precious. My Jules.”

He leans into me for a kiss, but a knock at the door breaks the moment between us, and Jay pokes his head around the corner.

“Oh, shit. I’m interrupting. I’ll leave,” Jay says.

“No. Don’t leave. Join us?” Griffin implores.

Jay’s consideration is heartwarming, but I want him with us so I pat the space beside me on the bed, reinforcing Griffin’s

request.

Crawling in beside me, Jay's presence cocoons me in warmth. My head drops to his shoulder, and he places a light kiss on my forehead.

Mhmm. Forehead kisses.

As we watch the movie, the others start to trickle in. First Ember and then Cy, but no Sage.

Cy answers my silent question around the tenth glance at the door. "She got called into the hospital."

I nod.

Ember is settled at the foot of the bed, and Cy has pulled a chair up beside us.

"Y'all don't have to be here, you know," I murmur.

"We know," Ember says simply.

"But we want to be," Jay adds.

"What about..." I try again.

Cy cuts me off. "They'll be here in a couple hours. Everything can wait till then."

Ember pops up suddenly and starts to race out of the room. "Oh, snacks! I'll grab snacks."

Laughter fills the room at their enthusiasm, and some of the pressure weighing on all of us is relieved a little.

I'm surrounded by people—and pupper—who care about me and who I love dearly.

With everything coming, I can't let them down.

I won't.

Stay Numb And Carry On

sage

Sometimes I really hate my pager.

I want to be with Juliana and the others right now, but since I came back work has been the constant that has kept me from falling apart. I want to be able to comfort them in the safety of our home, but of course, just after Griffin and Juliana left the kitchen, my pager beeps to call me into the hospital for an emergency in the ICU. Everything's always an emergency there and, while I am appreciative that it has put me in the position to take care of my people after the fire, it is exhausting.

The second I walk through the doors of the ICU, several pitying gazes fall on me. I approach the nurses' desk, and it's like every one of them deflates at the sight of me.

"Dr. Mathieson." Nurse Paige—unforgettable for her tiny stature and eager demeanor—addresses me with as much strength in her voice as a mouse. "Um... We paged you as soon as possible, but it all happened so quickly."

My eyebrow quirks up. "What happened quickly?"

A more seasoned nurse, Margaret Yang, takes over for the quickly wilting girl. “Stacy Rowan. The woman you brought into the ICU. She died not ten minutes before you got here.”

Shock rolls through my body. I force my hands to release from the fists they have formed as I take a few deep breaths, my head swirling with a thousand thoughts. I don’t normally get so involved with patients, but knowing Juliana counts her as one of her own has my heart too close.

“What happened?” I try to keep my voice even. It is not the nurses’ fault. It is *not* their fault. The blame lies purely on my shoulders.

“We did everything we could,” Margaret says softly.

“But she was doing so well. She was stable and regaining consciousness. What happened?” I hear when my voice turns cold, and Nurse Yang looks at me with shock and sympathy.

“We’re not sure either,” she replies carefully. “But they haven’t taken her downstairs to the morgue yet if you want to see her.”

“Have you contacted her next of kin?” I ask.

“She doesn’t have anyone listed. Not for next of kin, and her emergency contacts are that couple you were here with a month ago. You know, the man who got shot and his girlfriend.” If I weren’t so tense, I would laugh at how she refers to Jay and Juliana as a couple. They would love it. “But they weren’t picking up. So we called you.”

“Yeah, they have had a lot going on.” I sigh, thinking of the events of the past twenty-four hours. “Thank you. Thank you for calling. I know they will appreciate it,” I reply as I turn towards Stacy’s room.

“Um... Dr. Mathieson?” Margaret calls after me. “She has a daughter.”

I spin around in shock. “She what?”

If Margaret weren’t such a force, I would suspect I spotted her flinching at my remark. “She has a daughter in our system, Charlotte. That’s the only family listed.”

My jaw drops and my thoughts swirl. The poor girl. Where has she been staying for the past month? Who has been taking care of her? Anger rolls through me as I think of her being on her own.

“How old is she?” My frustration is barely contained.

“Eleven,” Margaret replies.

“Call child services. I need to know everything about her. Find out where she is.”

“Yes, Doctor.” The nurse quickly turns away and grabs the nearest phone at the nurses’ station.

Everyone nearby—all of them having listened to our exchange—all bounce back to life at my command, and I turn back toward Stacy’s room.

Reaching the room, I stop before the bed, ignoring its occupant for the time being, and read through Stacy’s chart.

Everything is so normal, nothing is out of place, and yet everything clearly went so wrong, so quickly. I comb through every detail hoping and praying to the gods there is some kind of answer there.

Walking to her side, I take in Stacy's paling features. Already her skin is losing its warmth and glow. I examine her from head to toe, but I am interrupted by someone clearing their throat.

"Um. Hi, we're here to take her downstairs," says the man.

"To the morgue," I say, not looking up.

"Yes," he tells me with a little regret in his voice. I see the two men, dressed in black scrubs, out of my periphery as they wheel in the gurney, but I don't look up until they're directly across from me.

Did they switch uniform colors for those in the morgue?

"Can you do me a favor..." I pause looking for their names, but one of the men speaks up, supplying it for me.

"Trevor," he says casually before motioning to his companion. "That's Ramón."

Looking back at Stacy, I realize if they are here, then I am already out of time. No time to look for myself and find out what went wrong. No time to look for the answers I want so desperately. No time to grieve for this woman and what we've lost.

"Trevor. Ramón. Right, sorry. Nice to meet you." I pause, considering my options. "Can you run every test you have? I

don't have proof, but this does not seem natural to me. Have the ME call me if he pushes back. I will explain and smooth things over."

Trevor looks at me with a scrunched brow, while Ramón is absently looking about the room.

"And you are? Sorry. New here," he says quickly.

"Dr. Mathieson. I head up the ER." I say, studying the sudden change in his demeanor at the mention of my name.

He looks nervous, and his lips are on the verge of telling me no when I interrupt. "I would see it as a personal favor. Please."

At that, he agrees a little too quickly. "Right. Right. Okay. Yes. We'll make sure."

Nodding to him, I leave so they may go about his work, making a mental note to talk with administration about the lack of competence in the new staff members and clear indicators of understaffing.

I drift out of Stacy's room in a daze. My hands itch to do something, but there is nothing I can fix now, nothing to mend. She is dead, and the realization hits me like an oncoming car wreck. I cannot look away.

I wander the halls until I stop in front of the on-call room, finding it blissfully empty, just like I hoped it would be. The sterile room seems somehow colder now. I shiver at the thought of how many people have passed through our halls never to return to their families. How many broken hearts have

left these walls with not a shred of hope. You would think after decades in the medical field I would be more accustomed to this, but seeing Juliana's friend lying still in the bed brought about a whole new set of fears.

Fears of one of the others ending up in one of my beds again. Or that Kieran will be the one I have to hear being loaded onto a gurney and wheeled downstairs. The thoughts are all consuming, and I feel myself curling into a protective ball on the bed where I lay.

She was safe. Stacy was injured, but recovering. She should have been safe here in our care. None of this makes sense and something feels *wrong* about the whole thing.

"Oh. Sorry, Dr. Mathieson." I didn't hear the nurse enter. My gaze is directly on Margaret standing in the doorway, but I can't bring myself to move or speak. "Dr. Mathieson?"

Forcing myself out of my stupor, I groan as I sit up. "Sorry. I just..."

"It's okay. Mine was a mother. She wasn't the first I saw die, but it was so close after I had my first child and it just hurt more than the others."

"Yes," I say simply. "It just hurts more than the others."

"Yeah." She pauses. "You can leave, you know. We called you in because of your connection to the woman, but you're not on call. You can go home. Go see Kieran."

Go see Kieran.

Tears well in my eyes.

If only I could.

I remember being led back to my car, but not the trip back home to the firehouse. I must have driven on autopilot to get myself back to my family, but I sit in the car for a long while when I arrive. It was clearly too long because it takes Ember knocking on the driver side window to bring me back to the present.

“Sorry,” I say, scrambling to unload myself from the car.

“We heard you pull in. Juliana got worried when we didn’t hear you come up,” Ember says, taking me in with their pierced brow furrowed in curiosity.

“Worried,” I repeat.

“Yeah. Worried.” They continue to study me. “You okay, Sage?”

That’s all it takes to start my sobbing.

Tears stream down my face rapidly, and my suddenly stuffy nose makes it harder to breathe. Everything passes in a watery blur as Ember leads me through the building, but the moment they open the door, I know exactly where we are. Juliana’s bedroom.

“Sage!” she cries, jumping over the others who surround her and off the bed. “Oh, my goddess. What’s wrong? What happened?”

She reaches me before I can reach out to her. I have not been held by anyone since the day in the hospital, and being in her arms again brings everything back with full force. Weeks of disregarding every thought and emotion I have about Kieran crashes into me like a train.

Guilt rises like bile in my throat. Worry has my lungs in a fist. Every fiber of my being is enduring the strain of my withheld and unaddressed emotions.

Everything hurts, but especially the knowledge I have done everything I could. Somehow it makes it worse. I did everything right. I trusted the people who knew better than me. I devoted myself to helping where I could, where my skills were needed. But none of it was enough. It is not enough to make all of these conflicting emotions go away, and it is not enough to bring Kieran home to me.

Employing every technique I know, I start to slow my breathing, counting in for seven, holding for ten, and out for seven. I find the rainbow in the room—red lipstick on the dresser, orange collar on Spencer who has crawled in my lap, yellow frame of the gilded mirror, emerald green quilt on the bed, blue wallpaper, purple athletic apparel hugging Juliana's body. When my breathing evens, I finally let the words and worries spill out.

“She's dead. Stacy died and I wasn't there.” I try to get the words out as evenly as possible. “I feel so useless. I am never where I should be when I'm needed. Never there for the people who need me.”

I feel multiple hands reach out to me in solidarity, their touch comforting and calming me a bit.

“Oh, Sage. Don’t say that,” Juliana soothes. “You’re needed here, with us.”

“No,” I snap, anger shooting to the surface. “My son needs me. I should be with him. But instead I have been fucking around just waiting to do as I’m told. I am fucking done. And I am going after Kieran whether you like it or not.”

I try to get up and storm out of the room, but Juliana catches me by the hand and I feel where Jay has me by the shoulder.

“We’re going to get him back. You have to know that. But if you go by yourself you’re just giving Arrick what he wants,” Juliana tries again.

“And that’s so bad? At least I will be with my son, my family,” I say, turning to her as she wipes away my tear tracks with a tissue.

“Your family is right here, Sage. And I’m not sacrificing one member of my family for another. I won’t let you go, and I promise I won’t let go of Kieran either.” When she finishes, she cups my face in her hands, and the seriousness in her gaze leaves me no room to doubt her. “I promise.”

And I believe her, almost.

Help Me Mama

GRIFFIN

With emotions running so high in the firehouse and nothing for me to really do, I figure the best use of my time is to make some food for the soul.

Or was that Chicken Soup for the Soul?

After Sage got back from the hospital, we resumed our puppy pile on Juliana's bed and rom-com marathon. Juliana was fiercely protective of Sage the whole time, holding onto her hand like it was the only thing keeping them with us on earth instead of floating away. I snuggled up in Sage's lap, and she stroked my hair with her free hand.

Rosie and Ash arrived around the time our third movie finished, ending our cuddle puddle. The others went to the war room to do their plotting and planning, but once they started in, I didn't feel my presence was really needed. Instead, I'm now standing in the pantry, hoping for some inspiration to come to me.

"You don't want to be in there with them?" Sage's voice comes from behind me.

I turn to see her standing in the center of the kitchen. Her eyes are still red from earlier, but some of the color has come back to her complexion and her shoulders are no longer up near her ears. Overall, she looks calmer, more centered than she did when she first came back from the hospital.

Dropping the news of Stacy's death hit everyone differently, but it seemed to impact Sage and Juliana the most. Juliana is doing her best to hold it together, but I can see the worry in her eyes. She immediately asked after Charlotte, Stacy's daughter, and it sent Sage into another fit of tears. The not knowing seems to be Sage's weakness, and it's painful to see her be anything but the strong woman I know she is.

"Nah. I've told Ember everything I know. If they need me, they'll come looking." I sigh, a little defeated. "They can just fill me in when they have a plan. I don't need to be there the whole time."

She nods in understanding.

"Why aren't you in there? You know more about Arrick than any one of us."

"I just... I am too close to it. I think if I was in the room, well, I wouldn't be helpful." Her lips drop into a frown, and I want nothing more than to wipe away the expression.

"Got it. I think I could use a distraction," I say, leaning over the counter, hoping to cheer her up. "How about you?"

Again, a small nod is all she gives me. She doesn't look sure of herself, but it's enough for me.

“Alrighty, then. Baking it is. Baking is my love language.” I tease.

A plan of action forms in my head and I grab the massive bag of almond flour from the pantry to be the base of our dish. Then I go through the kitchen opening up cabinets to grab all of the supplies we’ll need.

“Sage, go see if Cy has any amaretto in the liquor cabinet.”

I hear her footsteps fade and return as I gather the rest of the ingredients I need.

“What are we making?” she finally asks, handing over the bottle of amaretto.

I take the bottle from her, setting it beside the rest of the ingredients and go about finding the bowls and pans I’ll need.

“Tarta de Santiago. It’s like Spanish almond cake,” I answer, a smirk making its way onto my lips. “With a twist.”

She grins at me and it sends my heart soaring. She continues playfully, “And what’s the twist?”

I turn back to the cabinet with all of our drinkware, grab shot glasses from the top shelf, and turn back to her with a full toothy smile. “A drinking game.”

“Griffin, I’m forty-one. I do *not* play drinking games,” she groans.

It’s adorable how her nose scrunches and her eyes narrow with skepticism. When I see her reaction, there’s a singular

moment of doubt in my mind making me think this is a terrible decision. But I don't stop.

“Don't use it as an excuse. Come on. It will be fun, I promise.”

Her skepticism is amusing, but I can see the part of her wanting to let loose shining through her stoic mindset. The weight this woman carries on her shoulders is enormous, and for some reason she thinks she has to do it all on her own. But it isn't true anymore. She has us now.

“You know it's okay to be happy when the world falls to shit, right? Like, all of this sucks, but it's okay to enjoy the better moments when they come.” I reach for her hand from across the island, and though there's a moment of hesitation, she takes it. “We don't have to beat ourselves up every moment of every day because of things that have already happened.”

I guide her around the island to stand before me. Her eyes widen as I speak, and I can see her fighting against whatever thoughts are running through her mind.

I've known Sage for years, but I've never really gotten to *know* her until now. But now I do, I know she would do anything to right the wrongs in the world. This whole situation must be tearing her up. I know because I can see her frayed edges.

“It's okay to lean on us, too,” I continue. “We're not going anywhere. I hope you know that. And if you don't, then I'll just keep reminding you.”

I squeeze her hand tightly as I'm met with silence. Her lack of response doesn't make me falter though. If anything, I'm more determined than ever to make this woman set down her load.

Seeing that same sadness creep back into her features, I quickly redirect her attention, clapping my hand in preparation for our activity.

"Alright. So, it's a basic almond cake, hence the amaretto. You don't *need it* to make Tarta de Santiago but it does add to the flavor. But the best part is you get to partake while you bake." I chuckle. "Huh. Partake. Bake. I'm hilarious."

"You are sure you didn't start drinking before I got here?" I'm met with a tentative smile.

"Nah. When would I have had the time? Plus, gotta be sober, ish, to bake anything. The last time I tried drunk baking I made those everything-but-the-kitchen-sink cookie-brownie things. I remember they were delicious, but I don't know if it was the alcohol talking. Pretty sure they were raw to the center." I continue chattering as I start to assemble the cake, hoping something I say will bring about the same smile that disappeared all too quickly. "Okay, what's your favorite? Leftover batter or dough?"

"Like cake batter or cookie dough?" she asks, drawn out of her thoughts again by my question.

"Yeah. If you're gonna risk salmonella, which do you choose?" I joke.

“Do I have to choose?” Her nose crinkles again, and I’m sure she’s thinking of all the things that could go wrong with eating raw batter.

“Well... No. Nothing’s black and white, but which do you prefer?” I prompt, hoping to keep her from sinking back into the dark place in her mind.

True to herself, Sage is taking her time with the question, really thinking through the pros and cons of cake batter versus cookie dough, and I take the opportunity to study her. I remember when I first met her I couldn’t take my eyes off her, and for weeks the guys at the compound teased me I was gonna steal Arrick’s girl, which of course made Arrick furious, though he never said anything. Her blonde hair has lightened since then with the bits of white sprinkled throughout, but her eyes are still the same deep blue. She’s gained a little weight over the years, too, but her body looks so soft, and I want nothing more than to let myself sink into the comfort of her hold, to caress every dip and curve of her body.

“Cake batter,” she finally replies. “One, you get to lick the bowl and spatula once you have finished mixing everything. Two, the texture is better, creamier. Three, I don’t actually think I like raw cookie dough. I only really like cookies when they’re warm.”

The thoughtfulness of her response makes me smile, which she returns to my delight.

“Ah. A cookie purist. I can appreciate that.” I say, which elicits a small chuckle from Sage.

I finish lining and greasing the pan and begin pouring in the batter when Sage pushes herself off the edge of the counter where I left her and comes to me. After I finish pouring everything into the pan, I turn to take everything to the sink, but Sage snatches the spatula out of my hand.

“I said this was the best part. You heathen.” Her smile is huge and her eyes are sparkling with a playful energy I’ve missed.

She licks the spatula clean and I can’t help the groan escaping my lips.

“Sage, you can’t do shit like that,” I say, already feeling myself go hard.

“Hmm?” she hums, raising one eyebrow at me.

“Stop playing with me. If you don’t stop tongue fucking the spatula I’m going to combust.”

I’m beginning to sweat as she grabs the bowl from out of my hand and swipes some of the batter off the edge with her finger. The way she licks it from her finger has me imagining her tongue running across my cock. I can practically feel her lips around the head, sucking and licking at me until I’m fully hard.

“Oh, sweet boy, if I am going to play with you, you will know,” she purrs.

A shiver runs down my spine and I can feel the redness spread across my face at her insinuation. I let out another groan, and she laughs heartily at my pain.

“Fine. You want me to stop? I will stop.” She smirks, putting down the bowl.

She brushes past me on her way to the sink and turns on the water. My gaze never leaves her as she leans over to wash her hands. I would fall to my knees right now if she asked just for the privilege of burying my face between her thighs and grasping at her glorious ass.

“No. I mean...” I stutter.

“I know. And thank you. For doing this. For making things lighter. You are a good person, Griffin.”

Her honesty is striking and the way she’s looking at me is full of respect and admiration, and a bit of lust. I’m lost to her and she knows it. The change I’ve seen in her since she first joined me in the kitchen is evident, and I love how she’s starting to relax, her body slowly releasing the tension wreaking havoc on her body.

“Griffin, do you like Juliana?” she asks, turning back to me and drying her hands with a dish towel.

I burst out laughing. “Like, like-like her? Yeah. I guess you could say that.”

Her smile matches my own and there’s a moment where it seems like we’re two halves of a whole. It feels intimate, and I cling to the feeling of how right it is to be with her.

“Do you like-like me?” she asks a little more seriously this time, taking slow steps to creep into my personal space. I like her there; I like having her close.

I face her full on so she knows how sincere I am when I say, “Yes, Sage. I like-like you.”

Taking a final step toward her, I press myself to her body and angle my face down toward her own. She takes the hint and leans in to press a kiss against my lips.

She’s so soft, yet the kiss is firm. She tastes like almonds and smells like oranges. We haven’t had a single sip of alcohol and yet I feel drunk on her.

“Griffin, I want you,” she whispers as she pulls away.

“But...” I pause, searching for an explanation in her expression. “What about?”

“No. I don’t want to think about all of that.” Her brow furrows and her tone goes sharp. I want her soft and pliable again. “Give me this. Be my respite.”

“Okay,” I murmur, leaning into her lips for another, lighter kiss. “Take me.”

The energy between us is vibrating with pure need. There’s desperation in both of our gazes. A need for something real is clawing at both our throats and we’re looking to find it in each other.

“Now, Griffin,” she scolds.

“Yes, Mommy,” I blurt out. I step back, bumping into the counter behind me. I slap a hand over my mouth as my eyes go wide. Immediately I want to take back the endearment, but her grasp has me by the hips and I can’t move. Her hips have

my own pinned back against the counter and I *know* she can feel how hard I am through my jeans.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, trying to turn away from her.

“Why?” she asks, turning my face back to meet her own.

“It’s just something you say when you’re embarrassed, Sage.” My gaze drops as I sit in the awkward silence.

I’ve felt it building since our first time together with Juliana. The need for her direction, her comfort and care. I don’t understand it, but I want to be wanted by her. I need her to need me.

“Then why are you embarrassed?” she asks with pure patience.

“Because I just called you Mommy, maybe?” I can feel my blush all the way down to my toes.

“Oh, sweet boy. I have always known at some point you would come to me for this.”

“But you’re already a mom...” I hesitate. “Isn’t it weird?”

“Weird? No, sweetheart. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. To want someone to take care of you and put you first? It’s the most natural thing in the world.”

She reaches to run her fingers down my jawline, and, when she puts it like that, my nerves start to settle. Because it’s what it is, isn’t it?

I only had Angela and Abuela growing up. No matter how well taken care of I was, the little boy at the back of my mind

has screamed for the comfort of a mother. Desperately hoping someone will come along who knows what I need without asking and steps in without hesitation.

“You’re sure it’s okay?” I ask.

“Of course. I’d tell you if it wasn’t, right? Just like you’d tell me if you were ever uncomfortable with anything I do or say, right?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Yes, what?” she prods.

“Yes... Mommy?” I test the word again and it brings a beaming smile to Sage’s face.

“That’s right, sweet boy. And Mommy’s going to take good care of you now, isn’t she?” She reaches to undo my pants but stops before undoing the button. “You’re not caged, are you?”

“How did you know about that?” I ask nervously, pulling away from her slightly.

“Nothing stays secret in this place for too long.” She chuckles, pulling me back by the waistband of my jeans. “I found it on the drying rack a few days ago when I was washing dishes. And I have had to call the fire department more than once to get one off of a patient because our tools were not strong enough to break through the steel. It was either you or Cy. And I doubt Cy would be up for that.”

I stare at her dumbfounded and self-conscious.

“Nope. None of that. There is nothing to be embarrassed about. You like when someone else takes control. To be the person who you feel safe enough with to let them? That is an honor.” And I can see it in the sparkle of her eyes, how much it means to her. “Now, answer me. Does Juliana have you in a cage, sweet boy? Are you being punished? Rewarded maybe?”

“Not anymore. She took it off,” I manage.

“Did you like it, though? Did you like being hers?” she says as she goes about unbuttoning my jeans and lowering them to the ground, leaving me in my boxers and T-shirt.

Her hands run up under my shirt and over my hard stomach. Her fingertips explore every inch of my torso as she slowly raises my shirt like she’s memorizing every surface of my body.

“Do you like to belong to someone? To her? To me?” she asks and I can only whimper in response. “Answer me.”

“Yes. Yes, I want to belong.” She plucks my nipple and I cry out in ecstasy. “Yes, Mommy.”

When her lips connect with my own, every thought disappears from my mind and the only thing that matters is her.

I drop to my knees before her, to worship her body. I almost move to grind my face into the temptation of her pussy, instinctively reaching for the curve of her lush thighs and ass. I crave to caress her, grope her, squeeze her. I want to pull her

close enough to smell and taste. But I stop, looking up, begging for permission.

But she denies me.

“No, not this time. On your feet, Griffin.” A single finger comes under my chin to pull my attention back to her face. “I want you to choke me on your dick and come down my throat.”

My jaw drops open, but she helps me shut it again with a kiss and I meet her fervently.

Sage begins kissing down my cheek, throat, collarbone, and lower. Every inch of my body she touches with her lips comes alive under her attention.

When she drops to her knees, I marvel at the sight. Such a strong, wonderful woman shouldn't be on her knees before the likes of me. But here she is offering herself to me.

She grasps my boxers by their waistband and pulls down, revealing my thick cock.

Immediately she takes me into her hand. No hesitation. Her grip is firm and consistent as she strokes me. I revel in the sensations as she teases me with her touch and puffs of cool air on my tip. The contrasting sensations of the warmth of her hand and the cool air have me fully hard and pulsing in her grasp.

I throw my head back when she takes me in her mouth. The wet warmth of her envelops me, and I'm lost to her touch. She moves steadily up and down my cock, taking more of me each

time she swallows me down until I hit the back of her throat. I try to pull back when I feel her gag, but she holds me in place.

“Mommy, please,” I beg desperately.

The momentary reprieve as she pulls back isn't enough time for me to compose myself. Her grip is a firm reminder of her ownership of my body, how she alone controls my pleasure, and I'm struggling to hold back.

“Use me, Griffin. I know this isn't natural for you, but I need you to do this for me,” she says, languidly stroking my cock. “Force me to take you. Fuck my face and choke me on your cock until you come. Force me to swallow you or finish on my face and chest.”

I don't want to. Everything in me rebels against the idea of taking anything from this woman or using her for my own selfish desires.

“Use me for your pleasure. I need you to.”

With that simple request, everything changes. It's no longer about me racing toward my own pleasure, but making sure Sage gets what she needs. Right now it means me taking control, taking from her.

I can do this. For her.

“Open,” I command, a little hesitantly, but she obeys.

I shudder as my cock slides between her lips, her warmth surrounding me. I try to give her time to adjust to my girth but soon I'm overwhelmed by need as she uses her tongue to lick the underside of my tip.

My thrusts grow more rapid with each push down her throat and soon there are tears streaming down her face, but I don't let up. Her eyes are on mine the entire time, blazing with desire and lust.

I grab her by the back of the head, my fingers threading through her hair to get a firm grasp, and begin thrusting frantically, chasing my release.

"Fuck, Mommy," I groan. "You're taking my dick so well. Fuck, thank you, Mommy." My hand shifts to grasp the counter to keep me upright, my knuckles white.

Her hum of approval is what does me in. One simple sound has me tipping over the edge and into oblivion. My eyes slam shut at the first surge of release down her throat and my hips jerk with each spend after.

When I'm finished I pull out, carefully wiping away the mascara and tears on Sage's cheeks.

"Thank you," she whispers as she leans into the palm of my hand cupping her face. "For doing that for me. Thank you."

"Of course. Anything," I reply simply.

"Fuck, that was hot," Juliana says from the doorway.

Dancing in a Daydream

JULIANA

Griffin seems startled by my appearance, but I hate when I see a look of shame flash across his face. Crossing to where he stands, tightly gripping his T-shirt and jeans to cover up his still slightly hard cock, I cradle his jaw in my palm.

“You did nothing wrong, Griffin. You were so good for Sage.” I look down at the woman in question and smile. “You did good.”

They looked incredible together, their movements working in perfect unison. They were joined in a way that felt otherworldly, and I loved I could witness such pure bliss.

Sage asking, practically begging, Griffin to use her was unexpected, but the more I think on it, the more it makes sense. Like with me at the hospital a month ago, she needed someone to get out of her head and into her body. I can relate to needing to feel something other than the emotions building and building until they burst free, to needing an outlet that feels safe.

That’s what he did for her, what he does for all of us.

I kiss Griffin deeply and it seems to settle his inner turmoil, but I make a mental note to keep an eye on him. He's been a little all over the place emotionally recently, and a part of me worries.

When I turn to Sage I find her already standing and wiping away more of the mascara streaks on her face. She looks good, still clothed in her scrubs, and I want nothing more than to reach out to her, to kiss her senseless, but I hold back.

"You good?" I ask, knowing her answer may not be one I like.

"I will be," she responds simply.

"Okay." I study her, taking in her soft features and her blue eyes, still slightly rimmed with red from when she returned from the hospital earlier.

I long for the day when I get to see Sage in all smiles. Too often recently it seems her eyes have been rimmed with tears of sadness, and I want to replace every one with a tear of joy. But it will take time, and the first step is reuniting her with Kieran and making our family whole again.

"You needed us for something?" Sage asks.

"Oh, yeah. We got an update on Charlotte for you. She's safe." Sage lets out a sigh of relief and it's like a weight, small as it may be, has been lifted from her shoulders. "Rosie had picked her up and took her in when Stacy went into the hospital. So, she's safe at her place."

Sage nods along, something loosening in her at the knowledge that at least one child is safe.

The guilt I felt when I learned I forgot about the little girl was overwhelming. It clings to my heart and won't let go, but the knowledge that Rosie, and surprisingly Ash, stepped up for her is a small comfort making it bearable.

"It will need to be brought above board," Griffin says as he tugs on his boxers and pants. "If we don't want people asking questions, she needs to be placed with someone who's authorized to take care of a child on behalf of the state."

"Way to ruin a good moment, Griff." I can't help the chuckle I release as he awkwardly bounces around trying to get his clothes on. "You maybe wanna sit down and do that?"

"Nah, I'm good," he says, stumbling over before I catch him by the shoulders.

"Sure?" I laugh only to get a scowl in response from him.

"I can take her," Sage chimes in.

"What?" I ask, looking at her as I steady Griffin in my hold.

"If we need to bring things above board and she needs to be placed with someone approved by the state, then I can take her," Sage expands.

"How?"

"Shortly after starting in the ER, I convinced Arrick to go through the process to become an eligible foster parent. Kids would come through and there was usually need for temporary

placements. I wanted to be in a position to help but never heard anything beyond that we were approved.” She goes quiet for a moment. “Part of me thinks Arrick has something to do with that... But I’m pretty sure I would legally be allowed to take her.”

I take a moment to imagine that. Sage, surrounded by a large family and happy. But in my head it’s not Arrick she’s with. It’s me and Griffin and the others. I imagine birthdays and holidays. The picture is so crystal clear and in that moment, I realize I want that with them, all of them.

Love is one thing, but forever is another.

Forever is feeling a lot more real.

“Good enough for me,” Griffin says. “I’ll call Quinn and see if he can push it through the right channels with CPS.”

“Does she know what happened?” Sage asks quietly.

It’s clear Sage is a wonderful mother. Her first and only concern is for the well-being of her loved ones. And the way she’s so quickly stepped up for Charlotte is admirable.

“I don’t think so,” I say. “We haven’t told Rosie and Ash, yet.”

A somber, knowing look comes over Sage. It’s a look saying she knows what’s coming and has been through it before. “I can tell her.”

“Sage,” I protest.

“No. Stacy was under my care.” She steels herself. “I’ve done this before, I can tell her. And you can all be there for her when she needs it.”

I don’t like it, but this seems to be the best course of action we can take.

“Okay, well let’s get to it then.” Griffin looks so optimistic it makes my heart hurt. “Step one, find Rosie so we can go get Charlotte, right?”

Nodding, I led us all back to the war room where I left everyone to come and find our pair of master bakers.

When I enter the room, I’m confronted by the chaos of the situation occurring in the ten minutes I was gone. Papers are strewn across the table top and all of Ember’s screens have at least four different windows open with various views of security feeds, schematics, and other information I don’t bother trying to absorb yet.

Cy looks tense as he looks over a stack of papers in front of him with Ember hovering over his shoulder. I spot Ash leaning against the far wall and give them a nod of my head before crossing the room to Rosie who looks distraught.

“Hey, everything okay?”

Cy and Ember finally look up as I speak.

“No,” Rosie snaps then sighs. “I just... Ember told me. About Stacy. Goddess, what’s going to happen to Charlotte?”

“We have that figured out. Can you fetch her for us and bring her here?”

Rosie looks skeptical so Sage continues, “I’m registered with the state as a foster parent for emergency placements and can serve as her guardian.”

“Oh. Alright, yeah, we can do that.”

Something akin to sadness, maybe disappointment, washes over Rosie, and I can’t help but question the reaction.

“We.” Ember smirks.

“Shut up, Ember,” Rosie retorts as the dejected look from a second ago is replaced by a quickly forming blush on her cheeks.

I look at Ember for a clue, and their eyes shift smugly to look between Rosie and Ash.

“Go,” Cy growls to the room, which Ash takes as a personal direction.

She crosses to Rosie and there’s a moment of connection that passes between them. I think the whole room notices how Ash’s fingertips trail down Rosie’s arm and linger at her wrist as she pulls Rosie’s focus.

“Come on, Rosie. Charlotte will be fine.” Ash sighs. “We will go get her and pack a bag for her stay. We can stop at Whataburger on the way back for a milkshake. She’ll love it.”

The room is quiet as they have some kind of silent conversation between themselves. So much passes between them without a single word and yet it’s a full-blown conversation between two hearts. The looks of concern and longing and love are evident on their faces and yet neither

seem embarrassed to have a room full of witnesses for the conversation.

“Okay,” Rosie says resolutely. “Can we do dinner when we get back? I think it will help her settle in easier. She loves king ranch casserole.”

“I can make that happen,” Griffin offers, jumping up from where he had collapsed into a chair at the oval table.

“Okay. And she likes Squishmallows and Twizzlers. Maybe someone can run out and grab some? Oh, and coconut scented bath products.”

“Of course!” Sage soothes. “We’ll make her as comfortable as we can. I promise.”

Rosie seems settled a little by that, but I’ve known her for such a long time now I can see her holding back. “Do we have to tell her?” Rosie asks hesitantly.

“Yes,” I answer. “She deserves to know.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Ash takes Rosie by the hand and leads her from the room, leaving silence behind as we all contemplate what Charlotte’s arrival means for all of us.

It takes several hours to get the firehouse prepared. Griffin immediately started on a king ranch casserole as dinner for all of us and he’s fussing about the kitchen, swatting at anyone who gets in his way. Sage went to rearrange the room attached

to Kieran's and moved a bunch of blankets and pillows from one to the other to make the room more comfortable for Charlotte. Jay has been noticeably absent, and I haven't actually seen him since last night, but Cy and Ember stay confined to the war room the entire time.

I've been trying to keep busy but haven't really found a place where I'm needed. So, I ended up just taking Spencer on a walk. As I'm hanging up his leash, I hear Ash and Rosie pull up in the SUV.

The car comes to a stop and a sharp squeal follows one of the back doors being flung open.

"Oh my gosh, he's so cute!" the young girl cries as she quickly approaches Spencer and me, dropping to her knees right beside him. "What's his name?"

"His name is Spencer. And I'm guessing you're Charlotte?" I chuckle.

"Oh, yeah. Hi." She glances up briefly before refocusing on Spencer who's flopped down on his back, waiting for belly rubs. "Oh, you're such a cutie. Yes you are. Oh, yes you are! What a good boy you are! Yes. Such a good boy."

I smile at the enthusiasm and spirit of this young woman. I hate to think about how crushed she may be at the news of her mother's death, how much this will change her life.

"Charlotte, you could at least acknowledge Juliana," Rosie bemoans.

"I did! I said hi," the girl grumbles.

“It’s alright, Rosie.” I give her a look I hope is understanding. “Hey, Charlotte. Why don’t we all go in and have some dinner? Rumor has it someone made a king ranch casserole.”

“Oh, hell yes,” Charlotte chimes.

“Language, missy!” Rosie scolds.

“You’re not my mom, Rosie,” the girl huffs.

“Yeah, well. I’m taking care of you. So, tough. You have to deal with it,” Rosie says, but there’s no malice or condemnation in her tone. It sounds more guilty than anything.

“Buzzkill,” Charlotte mutters. “Ash is way more fun.”

I can’t help but cackle and Ash joins me.

“What? I’m fun too,” Rosie finally chimes in.

“I’m sure.” I chuckle. “Alright, gang. Enough of this. Let’s get inside.”

Watching Charlotte make her way inside, I hang back to speak with Rosie for a moment before everyone swarms.

“Hey.” I touch her arm to hold her back behind the others. “You and Ash?”

“It’s nothing. Or I think it is. I honestly don’t know at this point. Ash is... Ash.”

“Okay. Well, I’m here if you need me,” I tell her.

“Right.” Rosie rolls her eyes. “Pretty sure you have your hands full as it is.”

My smirk at her retort turns into a full-blown smile when I think of the people waiting inside for me.

“Yeah, well... It doesn't mean I'm just going to abandon my friends. Got it? You always have a place with me,” I say, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and guiding her toward the kitchen where the others have gathered.

“Thanks, Juliana. Maybe we just get through this right now,” Rosie concedes, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“That sounds like a plan.” I laugh.

When I enter the kitchen, everything is beautiful chaos. Charlotte has settled in with Griffin in the kitchen and they're giggling over whatever they're working on. Cy and Ash are talking in the corner while Ember is working away on their computer at the kitchen table. Across from them, Sage is at the table observing Charlotte and Griffin as they work. I notice Jay is still missing.

I go to sit next to Sage when her pager beeps.

“Everything all good?”

She looks at me, slightly paler than just moments before.

“Yeah. I just have to take this call. It...It's... I'll be right back.”

Six Feet Under

sage

It is not my first choice to lie to Juliana and the others, but I do not want to hurt her with the truth.

Leaving everyone behind in the kitchen, I make my way downstairs and outside, but before I am able to close the door behind me, the pager stops beeping. Panic shoots through my chest in fear I have missed my chance, but it doesn't have time to fester as my pager lights up again immediately. The same shock from seconds ago at seeing his number on the small screen has me frozen.

He has not reached out this whole time. It has been a month and he never called my cell, the hospital, anything. Radio silence and *now* he chooses to reach out?

My hands shake as I dial. "Arrick," I say coolly as the line connects.

"Sage, my little flower."

My stomach churns at the endearment. It used to be sweet when he would call me that. I used to melt under his touch as

he would take me by the chin and whisper sweet nothings to me. But now it makes me bristle.

“Do not call me that,” I snap. “I’m not yours anymore, Arrick. You lost me the second you raised a hand to me and my child.”

“Don’t say that, babe. We’re ‘till death do us part’, remember?” His voice crawls through the phone, dripping with poison.

“What do you want, Arrick?” My voice is sharp and with anyone else I would feel guilty for my tone, but not with him.

“What I’ve always wanted, my little flower. I want you to come home.” His pause has me on edge. “Kieran has been asking after you.”

My heart breaks hearing it. That he is scared and isolated and I haven’t been there for him. I recall the image of Kieran on Ember’s screen, and a fierce need to go to him pushes at my rib cage, but I hold back, knowing it is not the smart move.

Only I do not want to be smart. I want to be reckless. I want my son back.

“Is Kieran okay?” I ask.

“He’s fine,” Arrick growls. “He’d be better if his cunt of a mother would get over herself and come home to us already.”

The vitriol coming through the phone should shock me, but I’ve learned Arrick’s true nature by now, so it is no surprise at this point.

“I am not coming *home*, Arrick. You ruined our home and our family the second you started down this path of yours.” A spark of anger ignites in me, and I bite back. “You are a monster who doesn’t deserve us anymore. You ruined whatever happiness you thought you deserved a long time ago.”

I don’t need to see him to know his lips have curled into a self-satisfied smirk. He used to be my greatest dream but now he’s my worst nightmare, and I am *married* to him, thankfully not for much longer.

“Oh, little flower. I know you’ve always been an academic, but I thought you might have figured this out by now. I hold all the cards now, don’t I? You don’t really get a choice in this.”

I hold back a growl, knowing deep down that despite our progress, he’s right. We still don’t have enough to safely take Kieran back from him. I hold out hope, but it is not time yet.

“Your choice is simple. You come back to me and we get to be a family again. Otherwise, I’ll make certain Kieran never wants to speak to you ever again.”

“What are you talking about?” I say, jaw clenched and fist balled up tightly. My nails, short as I keep them, threaten to draw blood from my palm.

“I just think Kieran deserves the truth. I think he has a right to know his mother abandoned him and chose to run off with some slut and her friends. And I don’t think that’s something that can be easily forgiven.”

“Arrick,” I plead, adopting a more docile tone, the same one I used whenever he used to work himself into a rage.

“It’s only the truth, little flower. He’s old enough to know now. He’s old enough to know his mother is a whore. Did you think I didn’t know about your new friends? I have eyes everywhere, Sage.” I cringe at the sound of him using my name as it passes through the phone. “He’s old enough to know his mother doesn’t love him. That is, if she truly decides to abandon us.”

I am speechless. Defeat overwhelms me as I listen to his deep satisfied chuckle through the phone.

I love my son more than life itself. His threat should mean nothing. I should let it bounce off of me and focus on what I am capable of doing right now, but I am too caught up in his words, too caught up in the fear of losing my heart, soul, and sanity if I lose Kieran.

“Look, I’m going to make this easy for you,” Arrick rambles. “You have two days to decide. Either you come back to me, or you’re never seeing your son again and we are going without you.”

“What?” His sudden change in tactic has me reeling. “What do you mean you’re going without me?”

“There’s been some interest from eyes I’d rather not have poking around. So, Kieran and I are going to take a trip until some of this goes away.” Arrick sounds smug through the phone.

“I...” I have no words for him.

“Two days, Sage. That’s all you have.” He sighs, exasperated. “Just come back to me, little flower. It’s really not that hard of a decision.”

He’s right, though. The thought of never seeing Kieran again nearly breaks me, but more so, it makes me rage. Anger like I have never felt before boils up, but before I can let any of it out, the line goes dead.

“You fucking asshole. You dickless pig of a man!” I shout at my phone. “I hope you step on a Lego every day!”

As suddenly as my rage came on, all the energy drains from my body and the mounting fear and uncertainty takes hold. Breath escapes me and my sight blurs as tears fill my eyes. Stumbling for balance and breath, I make my way back inside. I count each step to try and center myself and hold back the tears.

As I near the kitchen, I hear loud laughter coming from the group and my anger sparks. Not at them, but at the whole situation, at Arrick.

How *dare* he threaten me and mine.

I am not able to fully enter the kitchen before Juliana is moving toward me. I must look as bad as I feel because she pulls me into her arms and immediately I relax into her embrace.

“It was Arrick.” I gasp into her shoulder. “Arrick called and he wants me to join him. He is leaving the country in two

days. He threatened Kieran.”

“Oh, goddess.” Her grip on me tightens.

“I’m calling the crew,” Ember chimes as they rise from the table to approach us. “We need to get a plan going. Like yesterday.”

I look up to focused expressions from everyone. Even the little girl, Charlotte, has a furrow in her brow as she looks at me falling apart.

“Are you okay?” she asks and my heart blooms with love for this little girl, a little girl whose heart I have to break in return.

I cannot contain the defeated laugh that comes out. “Not right now, but I will be.”

“Mom says creamy peanut butter and homemade vanilla Bluebell ice cream are the solution to all the world’s problems. Maybe try that,” she offers cheerfully, going back to working on the coloring page before her.

A grief filled silence falls at the mention of Stacy.

“Bluebell ice cream is a magical thing,” Griffin interrupts, breaking the tension before Charlotte notices. “Wanna see if we have any in the freezer?”

“Oh, hell yes! Can we make ice cream sundaes?” Her attention snaps to him.

“Language little miss. Mean aunt Rosie probably won’t let you if keep that up,” he says giving a quick glance to where

Rosie stands with a scowl on her face. “But let’s sneak to the pantry and see if she’ll let us get away with it.”

Griffin stands in the doorway, angled so he can still see all of us, trying to divert Charlotte away from our conversation.

Ember dives straight into business the second Charlotte is distracted enough. “I sent out the bat signal, so everyone should be here within the next few hours. We’ll have to stock up on things. And then there’s the matter of payment. We can call in a favor with a few of these people. But if we want all hands on deck, then we’re gonna need some serious cash.”

Juliana shakes her head. “Jay and I have assets we can liquidate for whatever we need. Just let me know the amount.”

I look at her bewildered.

“What?” She shrugs. “Do you know how much horny straight men spend at strip clubs? We do just fine.”

“Alright then. I’ll start pulling together a briefing for everyone,” Ember says.

Cy huffs. “Hope that includes a miracle, ‘cause we’re gonna need it.”

Them

EMBER

Pulling everything we know about Arrick Mathieson and all of his operations takes a surprisingly short amount of time, especially once I kicked the others out of my office to get the work done, though really we've been compiling all of it for the past month. Within hours of Sage returning to the firehouse with news about Stacy, everything was set into motion. Rosie and Ash were called in, and we've been going through all of the details with a fine-toothed comb. Our "war room" truly looks like its namesake now, with photos and documents strewn about and hung up on the walls. There's not a surface in sight which isn't covered with some document or photo we're hoping can help us put together a plan to rescue Kieran.

Speaking of help... the friends joining us, if I can call them that, are particular about how they work and what they will and won't do. Each of them has their own skills and morals. I've never had an issue with any of them in the past, but I suspect some won't want to partake in our rescue mission. Still, it's worth asking for help.

I'm nervous, though.

Everyone, including Cy, has this impression of me that nothing can rattle me, but this? This does. I'll never understand the pain Sage goes through every day with Kieran being away, but his absence is noticed by the rest of us, too. More recently, it's been weighing heavily on my heart and eating at me from the inside out.

Hearing Arrick is trying to leverage Kieran to get to Sage had my frustration skyrocketing. My whole body feels like there are fire ants crawling across my skin, leaving me shivering with dread.

Kieran's a kid. A good one. He doesn't deserve to be confined to whatever miserable existence his dad has him living. He deserves to laugh and play and create to his heart's content. Kids should spend their time enjoying their childhood, not being used as a pawn in adult drama.

I let my anger fuel me as I work through the screens full of documents, schematics, and communications. Each one fills in the picture of Arrick's operations a little more, yet each one leaves me with more questions. Ones that don't have easy answers.

Why did he get into trafficking when his drug operations were doing just fine? How did he get pulled into all of this? What's the point?

That's what it really comes down to, doesn't it? What's the point of all of the secrecy and security at this point? We already know most of the details. So what's being hidden from

us? What is waiting around the corner to jump us and when is that shoe going to drop?

“Hey, how’s it going?” Juliana interrupts from behind me.

“Good? I think.” My shoulders drop as she places her hands on them and presses her thumbs into the knots at the base of my neck. “It’s just a lot of information and I don’t really know what to do with it all.”

“Yeah, well, that’s why we’re calling in backup, right? For help?” she offers and I can hear the restraint in her voice without looking at her.

I know this has been hard on her; it’s been difficult for all of us. But Juliana’s experience with Arrick colors every moment of her life and his mark on her is deeper than just the scars he left on her body. But like her scars, she’s healed beautifully and evolved into a new version of herself. She’s indestructible.

“Sure, but these people are specialists in their fields,” I say, looking up into her confused face, brow furrowed with unspoken questions. “Nox is all about his chemicals. He’s perfected the art of knocking someone out without them knowing. Jazzy is a combat specialist and taught me to put a person to sleep with one pinch. Gunnar, Lux, Demi, and all the rest are the same. They’re experts at their thing. They take orders and execute really well, but none of us have ever worked on this scale before. We’ve never worked together like this. In pairs or small groups, maybe. But never all of us making a cohesive effort for something.”

Juliana's face gives nothing away but her hands have drawn away from my shoulders and her fingers are tapping away, thumb to finger in a pattern.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Back and forth, her fingers play as she thinks and the furrow deepens on her brow.

“Okay,” She finally says.

“Okay?” I ask, a little taken aback.

She sighs. “Look, I’ve never done any of this before. I shot a man and ended his life less than a day ago. Now we’re planning, what? A raid, I guess? All of this is new. So, yeah. Okay. We’ll deal with it as we go.”

The way she manages to keep moving forward is admirable. Her drive to survive is what has kept her alive and continues to do so. She’s stronger than she gives herself credit for, but somehow maintains a softness to her all the while.

“Cy said you told him and the other guys you love them.”

The words are out of my mouth before I can think them through, and Juliana falls quiet. She's looking at me with intensity and something akin to longing strikes in my chest. Her silence scares me, but I think her possible answers to the thoughts swirling in my head might terrify me more.

“Have you told Sage?” I ask, desperately hoping for more from her.

“Not yet. But I will.” She looks at me curiously and sits in the chair next to me, rolling it over so I'm caged in between her knees.

“And... And me?” I ask hesitantly.

Breath caught in my chest, I study her for any micro expression hinting at what she's thinking. Is the tightening of her jaw a good thing? Is the redness in her cheeks from embarrassment or rage? I want to hope for the best, but I don't want my heart to get shattered in the process.

“I do love you, Ember. Really. Please don't doubt that.” She hesitates, and my pulse picks up in anticipation of the rejection to come. “But I don't want to cross any boundaries. Okay?”

“Boundaries?” I repeat, unsure where she's going with this.

“Yeah. My romantic relationships—gods, I really hope I'm not making too many assumptions here—they have normally included a physical component. I don't know what one without it looks like. I don't want to make you uncomfortable or ask for more than you're willing to give.”

Her nervousness at her confession is adorable and it draws me closer, needing to be near her to let her honesty and vulnerability wash over me. But the cheeky part of me wants to push her.

“You’re cute,” I tease. “You’ve seen me get myself off and you think physical intimacy is completely off the table.” I laugh a full-bodied laugh. “Bestie, I don’t feel sexual attraction to people, but I do feel romantic attraction. And yeah, I don’t always want to participate in physical intimacy, or at least I like to participate in my own way, but it doesn’t mean we couldn’t ever be like that with each other.”

“I thought...” she stammers. And it’s cute to see her so off kilter.

“That asexuality meant I’m repulsed by physical intimacy? Yeah. No. For some people, sure. But it’s not how it is for me.” I chuckle. “Juliana, I like you. You’re smart, kind, and tough as diamonds. You’re a beautiful woman. There’s no denying that. And you have a good heart. That’s what I want with you.”

“Oh.” Her eyes are so wide it’s comical. You’d think the girl has never taken a compliment in her life before.

“Too much?” I ask, hoping and praying to whatever deity is listening she’s okay with how I just poured out my heart to her.

“No! Gods, no. Just...” The way she bites down on her lip as she puzzles makes me smile. “I just don’t think I’ve ever had a conversation that was so straightforward like this. I’m just processing, I think.”

Yeah, her mind is definitely churning based on the tiny furrow of her brow refusing to leave.

“And you and Cy. You’re good?” she asks.

“Yeah, we’re good. You might have to pull a Jay and pull some teeth to get him to admit it, but we’re on the same page if you’re game.” I smile at her, my whole body warming under her gaze.

“And the others. You don’t...”

“Mind? Nah. I think you’ve got us all tangled up in each other and I don’t think anyone is uncomfortable with it,” I admit. “Love isn’t a finite thing. We all start by learning to love ourselves—some later than others—but once you have it figured out, it doesn’t really matter how many people there are to love.”

“You know, you’re really poetic when you’re stressed.” Her smirk is charming enough to make me swoon.

“Stressed? I’m not stressed,” I counter.

She gives me a pointed look. “You haven’t stopped twisting your headphone wire since I walked in here, Ember. Yeah. You’re stressed.”

“Speak for yourself.” I smirk.

A comfortable silence wraps around us. I turn back to my computer screens and continue to work through all the documents as she sits next to me and watches me work. When her hand comes to rest on my knee, I turn to look at her and

smile. This feels right. Even amidst all of the chaos and uncertainty, this one thing feels right.

“I love you, you know,” I admit out loud, finally.

“I do. And I love you too,” she replies with a grin.

Killer Queen

cy

Ember and I started the Ascendancy Group years ago after we left the military, and through the years it's grown to be a small network of mercenaries willing to do the hard things, but we've maintained a certain moral compass among us. On paper we're a consulting group who specializes in asset recovery. The people you turn to when you run out of normal channels to right a wrong. Because sometimes the bad guys make the best good guys.

Most of us are ex-military, but some have come to this life through different means. We stole Ash from the U.S. government the second they came up for re-enlistment, and Demi was definitely military along with Jaz. I think Lux was a teacher before—probably chemistry, if I had to guess. The others like Nox and Gunnar are less clear, they've been doing this for so long.

In over a decade, though, Ember and I have never asked the group for help with a personal project. There's never been anything that warranted bringing in the whole group to help us solve. But Sage's cry for help was as desperate as I've ever

seen, and I knew what was coming the second she walked into the room and told us about Arrick's call. I don't care how many favors we're calling in for this, Arrick Mathieson stops fucking with us, now.

Lux and Demi are the first to arrive of everyone we reached out to, and I have them toss in their stuff into one of the bunk rooms. It's like a homecoming having them back. Almost six months have passed since I actually saw them in person, but as always, it's like picking up right where we left off. Everyone easily slips back into our old routines and patterns together.

"Hey, Cy," Lux says cheerfully, popping beside me where I lean over the table in the war room.

"Hey, lil Lux." I smirk at her.

"I'm five feet tall and I'd still kick your ass, Cy," she growls, but there's a humor to her voice that doesn't go unnoticed.

She's easy to rile, though, and I can't help but rib her. "Yeah, well, I've yet to see it happen. So until then, you're still lil Lux to me."

"Fuck you, Cy," she says with a sharp slap to my bicep.

It feels good to banter like this with her. Where so many things have felt off center, this feels normal. We're just preparing for another mission like any other.

Only this isn't like anything else we've tackled, and I'm more invested than I've ever been in a project. My heart aches because Juliana and Ember's do, too. My body is on edge

because the tension in Sage's shoulders hasn't left in the entire month Kieran's been gone. And Jay and Griffin's rage fuels my own.

As though she's reading my thoughts, Lux decides to point out, "You've never called in the calvary before."

I shake my head, trying to get myself under control. "Yeah. Well, this got personal."

The look she gives me is suspicious. Knowing someone for over a decade will do that for you.

"You caught feelings for someone. Or someone's?" Lux's jaw drops open and she grabs me by the shoulders to turn me to her fully. I remain silent. "Oh, my gods. You did, didn't you! Oh, you lucky bastard. Who are they?"

With impeccable timing, Juliana and Ember walk into the war room where we stand. Ember is in their standard jeans, T-shirt, and leather jacket, but it's Juliana who takes my breath away. She's clad in black from head to toe, making her blonde hair bright in the dimly lit room. A dark shade of lipstick on her extremely kissable lips contrasts her pale complexion. Her clothes hug every curve of her body, and my eyes journey down from the curve of her neck, over the swell of her perfect breast, and down to the hips my fingers itch to dig into.

"Oh, my goddess. They're gorgeous. No wonder you're all silently sappy about it." Lux is turning on her heels and barreling toward Juliana before I can stop her. Under other circumstances I would be concerned, but Juliana can hold her

own, so I remain where I am and lean against the table to see how Juliana reacts to Lux.

“Hi, I’m Lux,” she says, going into a hug before pulling back and holding out her hand to Juliana who takes it tentatively. “Sorry. I’m a hugger, but like... boundaries. My partner Demi is around here somewhere.”

“Juliana.”

“Cy’s told me nothing, which tells me everything. But I have *questions* and I need answers, which I’ll never drag out of him.” Lux says, dragging Juliana toward the couch in the corner. “I need to know everything; how y’all met...”

I tune her out and focus on Ember who’s now leaning against the table next to me, observing the chaos that is Lux.

“How did she figure it out?” they ask.

“She’s nosy and way too into other people’s business.” I huff.

“Probably nothing,” they say with consideration. “But she’s always been quick to jump to conclusions. What’s she convinced herself of now?”

I give Ember the side eye in hopes they don’t make me say it out loud. It’s easy enough to guess anyway. Ember’s seen my feelings written across my face since before the first time I fucked Juliana. After that, there was no hiding anything from them, and though Juliana still hasn’t heard me say the words, I do love her back, just as fiercely as she declared in the bedroom.

“Oh, you’re in luurv. That’s what’s got your panties in a wad, isn’t it? She guessed you have a new boo and now you’re pissy about it.”

“Can we not call her boo? She’s a woman, not Yogi bear’s best friend in a bowtie.”

Ember just smirks nestles into me. “Have you talked with her yet?” they ask.

“Nah. Said I would later.” I try brushing them off, hoping I can keep things bottled for just a bit longer.

“Cy, later is now.” They unfold themselves from under my arm where it lay around their shoulders. “The calvary is coming, but not everyone comes home from war. Right?”

“It’s only been a few months. It’s too soon,” I grumble.

“Yeah, and it took you over two years to get over yourself and tell me you loved me though you knew on day one, right?” Ember sighs deeply and goes to reach for my now free hand. “You already know how she feels. What’s holding you back?”

That’s the sticking point, though, isn’t it? I don’t know. At least not for sure. She said those three words to me when two other men I *know* she adores were in the room. She probably just said it so I wouldn’t feel bad.

Not that I would.

Even though I might if I was being more honest with myself.

“I know how she feels about them. Not about me,” I say softly.

“Seriously?” Ember jabs me in the chest with their finger. “If that were true then there’s no way she would be looking over here at you with goo goo eyes.”

I turn to see Juliana, bright blue eyes shining bright as stars in the middle of nowhere, staring directly at me as Lux chatters about her trip with Demi to Paris—for a job most likely, but that’s probably a minor detail in Lux’s mind. The way Juliana is looking at me, though, tells me everything I need to know.

She does love me.

I just need to get the fuck over myself and tell her myself.

More people start to trickle in and fill the war room, and it’s like a reunion of sorts with beers being passed around and food scattered on the table among all of the papers. Ash is stashed in the corner, for once separated from Rosie while she keeps an eye on Charlotte. Sprawled out over one of the rolling chairs is Gunnar with Jaz next to him.

Nox is the last to arrive of the group, but as soon as he enters the room, he’s full steam ahead. “Alright, fuckers. Who’s lit y’all’s ass on fire?” he gripes.

Ember bursts out laughing as the newer members of our group stare in disbelief. “You have no idea... Welcome back, Nox. It’s good to see you, too.”

“Ember.” A devilish grin spreads across his face, making him more handsome than anyone really has a right to be. He’s a short guy who fills the room with his booming voice and big personality. Like his eyes are capable of a glare which could take down any opponent, his cropped hair is dark. If he weren’t a long-time friend, he’d scare me shitless.

“You keepin’ the guy in line?” he says with a lift of his chin in my direction.

“You know it. He gets away with nothing with us around,” they reply.

I scowl at them both. “Alright, enough of this. You’re here. Sit down and get started,” I snap.

“Mhmm. Yeah! I’ve been wondering what this gathering of the Super’s is all about,” Lux sings.

I huff half a laugh at the joke, but it is a pretty good description.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sage shrinking into herself, like the guilt of asking so much from strangers is overwhelming her. Juliana seems to notice as well and moves to sit beside her, clasping Sage’s hand in her own. It settles me to see how tender they are with each other.

“We have a personal favor to ask,” I start. “We have a retrieval that needs to happen.”

“You could have totally handled that on your own. Why’d ‘ya need us?” Gunnar snarks. He’s a sniper of unmatched caliber, and he normally has the patience of a saint. But I see

how his snipe has Sage snapping back, and I want to strangle him for making her feel anything close to guilt.

“It’s my son,” Sage speaks up. “His father is... He’s not a good person. And he took Kieran and is keeping him from me.”

“A kid.” Lux sucks in a breath, and Demi’s hand goes to the back of her neck holding her firmly in place. “What’s the plan then?” Lux asks, all cheerfulness gone in an instant.

“Right now, Arrick is keeping Kieran in his compound.” I dive into my explanation, taking comfort in the fact I know how to do this. “The guy is really particular about his security and nothing goes unnoticed, so we’re gonna have trouble getting in this time.”

“This time?” Demi finally speaks up.

“Yeah. We went... Well, last time it was Juliana who played Peach in Bowser’s castle,” Ember explains. “Last time we went in and shut off security before setting a fire in the warehouse, which turned on the sprinkler system and distracted everyone. We were able to make our way through the building because they were operating without all the information from their security systems. Then we ran into Griffin and Juliana. And we can’t exactly pull that again. Especially not with all the upgrades and changes he’s made to the grounds.”

A grunt in the affirmative comes from Gunnar.

“Arrick probably suspects we’ll be coming after him, too. If he called Sage, then he has something up his sleeve,” Griffin supplies. “He’s confident that no matter what we try, we’ll fail. That’s the only reason he’d make such a direct threat. Anything less would be a hit to his ego.”

“What threat?” Nox asks.

“He’s threatening to take Kieran out of the country,” Sage explains.

“More like disappear with the kid,” I mumble.

“Well shit. That’s no bueno,” Nox says.

Lux is studying the ground plans of the compound while her partner, Demi, watches her with a smile on their face. Knowing her, she’ll be cataloging every support and joint in the whole compound looking for the weakest points to take it down in a heartbeat.

“What are you seeing?” I ask.

“Hmm?” Lux hums, her full concentration on the plans before her. “Oh. Nothing. Well, just an idea. Do we know where the kid is? Kieran, right?”

Sage speaks up again. “He’s in his father’s office.”

“Here.” Juliana points out the room on the schematic with a slight shake in her hand. She’s still got one hand wrapped in Sage’s, and I’m realizing it’s as much for her as it is for the doctor. She’s scared but hiding it well.

But not from me.

“Got it,” Lux responds before going back to her silent puzzling. “Okay. That changes things a little.”

“So, what? We’re just gonna let Lux blow things up until we get to the kid?” Gunnar snarks.

“Oh, shut up old man,” Lux snaps. “Try contributing for once.”

“Jaz, you’ve been real quiet,” Ember prompts gently.

“Just reading. Sorry,” Jaz replies, looking up from the stack of papers in their hands. “I don’t really care what we do, but I really hope someone tells me we’re not leaving this Arrick dude alive. He’s a fuckin’ monster.” They look up staring straight at Sage, wide eyed. “Shit. Sorry.”

“No. It’s fine. I’m coming to terms with it. I just don’t want him to hurt anyone else.” She looks over at Juliana.

“I think we can all agree Arrick deserves whatever is coming for him,” Ash chimes in.

“And more,” Griffin grumbles, his eyes locked in on Juliana.

“Okay, well, then let’s dig in and figure this shit out,” I prompt.

Body Language

GRIFFIN

Things are loose right now, but we've pretty much figured out how Ember can bypass the security system to give us enough time to enter the building. However, the system was reconfigured to make it nearly impossible to shut it down completely. The general idea is to split into teams to tackle different parts of the compound. Sage will, of course, be going straight for Kieran with the others in our tight circle to get him to safety as soon as possible. Some of the newer folks are going to clear out the cages, and the rest will take care of the drug operations that are all housed there.

The further we dive into plans, the more I see everyone changing. Like when we sat down at the kitchen table, Ember is thriving on energy drinks and bouncing off the wall. Cy has completely switched into his military mindset, which is both intimidating and kinda sexy. Sage is quiet but focused.

But it's in Juliana that I've seen the biggest change.

It's like she's turned into herself. There's not the same distance between her and others that exists whenever she's shut down, but it's like she's entirely engrossed in something,

internally guarding herself. She's been razor focused and directing the team. She quietly commands every square inch of the room, and even the Ascendancy Group crew pounced to fulfill every request, every demand. No one questions her. There is only obedience. We've all intuitively accepted her as our leader. No questions asked.

Around midnight Jules asked if anyone had seen Jay and realized he disappeared again. He's not answering phone calls or texts either. Ember can't trace his phone which, hopefully, means he went off the radar for a good reason and not a dangerous one. He's been gone for twenty-four hours with no word to any of us or any clue what he's doing. I know Juliana is worried, but I think, much like how Sage is handling Kieran's kidnapping, she's just trying to distract herself from his absence with work.

My delirium sets in around three in the morning. We've been at it for hours, going over documents and outlining plans, and the newer members of our group have all gone to bed. It's only Juliana, Cy, Ember, and Sage left.

After Juliana's hundredth glance at the doorway, I give up on being subtle and go settle beside her at the long table.

"Hey, you okay?" I ask, knowing she's not.

She sighs deeply and her head drops a little. The secure front she's had for the past hours drops a little for me and I see how exhausted she really is.

"I'm just tired. And worried," she replies.

“Jay?”

“Yeah. Just like... why hasn't respond? And like why didn't he tell anyone when he left? It just all seems....” She struggles for words. “Well, I don't know how it seems. It just feels wrong not to have him here.”

“I get that.”

I reach for her hand, hoping our connection will help soothe her and force her to unclench her hands from where they rest on her leather clad legs. She looks at me with such sorrow in her expression, exhaustion as clear on her face as the deep purple under her eyes.

“We should probably all go to bed. None of us are doing any good here anymore,” I say, now speaking to the room.

“Speak for yourself, slacker,” Cy retorts, but his tone is halfhearted. For once, he looks unkempt and uncomfortable. The strong, stoic shield he uses has dissipated a little, revealing something softer to our intimate group.

“Gentlemen, stop.” Sage sighs and rolls her eyes at our antics. “He's right and you know it, Cy. We're all exhausted.”

I childishly want to taunt him, but I'm too tired to do that.

“Alright. Let's call it a night,” Ember says, shutting down their computers.

“What about Jay?” I ask, knowing Juliana won't stop her worrying until he's back.

“Nothin’ to do. Can’t fix what we can’t see,” Cy grumbles, clearly pissed at Jay’s disappearing act.

Juliana takes me by the hand to get my attention, “We’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

I nod, still feeling defeated despite the progress we’ve made tonight.

Jules pulls me out of the war room by the hand as everyone picks up their things to leave. We pass down the hallway and arrive at our doors, me turning to the left and her to the right, when she stops suddenly, grabbing the attention of everyone who’s followed us.

“I don’t think I can do this,” she whispers.

“What?” I say, whipping back around to face her. My thoughts immediately run through every interaction we’ve had recently, trying to find a moment where I fucked this up. Trying to figure out what may have gone wrong to make her rethink our entire relationship so suddenly like this.

“Just like that? We’re over?” My voice comes out hoarse.

“What?” she says, sounding panicked as she turns around to face me before crossing the hall and taking my face between her hands. “Oh, my gods. Griffin. No. I was talking about sleeping alone. Not us.”

Tension rolls off my shoulders at her explanation, and I take a breath to recenter myself as my heart rate slows to a normal pace.

“Griffin, I would never do that. Goddess.” Her thumb grazes over my cheek in a soothing motion. I can’t help but lean into her touch as she studies me.

“I’m sorry. I just... I’m overtired. My brain went to the worst-case scenario,” I confess.

Releasing my face, she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me down, bringing her face close to my own. Instinctively, I reach for her, grasping her by her full hips. I revel in the feeling of her soft body pressed up against my own hard one.

“I love you, Griffin Reyes. Please don’t doubt me,” she soothes, placing kisses up and down my jawline. “I was just saying I don’t want to sleep alone. That’s all.”

Juliana lets out a squeal as she’s pulled away from me and swept up into Cy’s arms like a bride. He readjusts her a bit before leaning down and placing a kiss on her forehead. “Well, that’s easy to solve,” he says, kicking her slightly ajar door. “We’re all sleeping in your room.”

The clock by the bed tells me it’s around 7 a.m. and, despite everyone sleeping deeply and all tangled up together, I wake up only a few hours after going to bed because my brain refuses to shut down. I hold Jules in my arms as she rests and run my fingers through her hair. It’s too quiet and my thoughts keep straying to Jay, wondering where he is and hoping he’s okay.

We don't know each other well, but it's hard not to feel anything for him. He took care of me when I was lost deep in my own fears and held me as I released some of the pressure. I cried in his arms, and he did everything he could to reassure me the thoughts swirling in my head aren't true.

So, yeah... it's hard not to worry for him.

I get up to go to the kitchen to settle my nerves and when I release her, Jules turns to settle into Sage's arms. The second I get out of the bed, Ember is taking my place with Cy close behind them.

I'm only a few steps away when Juliana's bedroom door opens, revealing Jay as if my worries made him appear.

"You motherfucker," I growl as I grab him by his shirt and push him out into the hallway to slam him into the wall. "Where the fuck have you been?"

He looks just as exhausted as the rest of us. Looking worse for wear, Jay's clothes are askew and his hair is messy, as though he's been running his fingers through it repeatedly. There are dark circles under his bloodshot eyes.

He scrambles for words, but before he can get anything out, I'm pressing my lips to his own. I don't know what pushes me to do it, but the need to feel him, knowing he's safe, is overwhelming.

After the shock seems to wear off, Jay wordlessly presses himself into me and kisses me back. His lip's part, and I dive

into him. Our lips tangle in a fight for dominance, but I'm not backing down. Not this time, not for him.

"We need to talk," he finally says between kisses.

"Not now," I reply, nipping at his bottom lip.

"Griffin." His groan reverberates through me, and I feel myself hardening.

"I said. Not. Now." Dominance takes over as I grasp him firmly by the back of his neck. "You disappeared on us, then show up out of nowhere? You don't get to call the shots right now."

I swoop in again and take his lips. He melts a little in my hold and I push my fingers into his hair, my other going to his ass to keep him close. Close enough he can feel my cock already thickening in my pajama pants.

"We were so worried," I whisper as I pull away slightly.

"I'm sorry," Jay says breathlessly. "I was..."

"I don't care right now, okay? You're here. Be here with me. Please." A small, embarrassing whine works its way into my voice at the end.

"I just need you to know..." he starts.

"No. No talking. Just be here." My head rests against his as we both breathe heavily.

"Griffin, I need to talk with..." he starts.

"I think you need something to keep your mouth occupied, brat," I say, kissing him passionately.

When I pull back, I see the spark of heat in his eyes. He seems surprised by it himself, but it doesn't feel like my distraction is entirely unwelcome, despite his protest.

“And you're suggesting, what, exactly?” he asks, a purr in his voice.

“If you're swallowing my dick, then you can't be one yourself, now can you?”

Feel What I'm Feeling

Jay

“Oh, you want that, don't you?” he purrs. “You want to get on your knees for me and take my cock like a good little whore?”

The weight of Griffin's body against mine has me more awake than I've been in the past twenty-four hours, but it's his words setting my nerves on fire. I can feel every rippling muscle on display. Each movement he makes draws my attention to a part of his exquisite form and the tattoos adorning him. The way the sun dawns through the windows and hits his features makes him look like a Roman statue, everything chiseled to perfection, all while having a rough quality about them. He's a beautiful man, but I would never tell him that.

We've never been like this before. I've never seen him so insistent, so demanding, and it's hot as hell. The lust in his eyes as he looks at me, caged between him and the wall, makes my mouth water.

“Make me,” I whisper.

For a second, shock flashes across his face, but it's like his brain finally catches up with my words and he's back to this new smug dominating presence.

"Down, boy," he grunts, grinding his hardening dick into me.

"And what if I don't want to?" My mocking tone makes his brow furrow, and I smile wider.

"Then you'll be punished." He seems hesitant as he responds, like he's not sure if what we're doing is okay.

But it is, and I want this.

"How?" I'm purposely pushing his buttons, seeing how far he's willing to go with this.

"There are a few things coming to mind." He smirks, a little surer of himself now.

My chuckle at his taunt is low and I push back, "Yeah, riiight."

"Tell me you want this, Jay." His expression turns pleading, as if expecting rejection.

The way he flips between confident and commanding, and his typical sweet demeanor, would be startling if not for the way he's looking at me right now. There's so much concern.

It feels so good to be recognized like this. Like he's seeing every slow healing wound on my heart and asking permission to hold my hand through it, returning the favor I so easily provided to him before. It's a balance, a silent back and forth,

allowing us to find harmony. His command isn't a form of control; it's safety and comfort. I crave it.

“Yes,” I breathe. “I do, Griffin.”

“And it's okay...” He clears his throat. “The names?”

“Yeah. I like the names.” I smirk at him, reaching down to caress his cock through his pants.

I caress up and down his length and, like a switch being flipped, Griffin has a hard look back on his face says I'm in danger.

“Then get on your knees and take out my cock like a good fucking slut.”

A strong push to his chest makes him take a step back from me, giving me enough space to slowly lower myself. I run my hands down his chest and abs as I go to my knees before him, dragging my nails across his skin, making him shiver in anticipation. I meet his gaze straight on from where I kneel on the ground and give him a nod, just to reassure him I have no hesitations.

I'm faced with his bulging cock, barely hidden by his pajama pants. I can see the full outline of his shaft and tip pressing against the tented fabric. A small wet spot has formed near his head where his pre-cum has gathered. I reach for him, grasping the back of his thighs to keep me upright, and run my nose up his length.

“You like what you see?” he asks with a knowing smile on his face. “Of course you would. You want nothing more than

to take my cock down your throat like the good little whore you are.”

I look up to his face to witness pure reverence as he talks down to me. His words are harsh, but his gaze is soft. Degradation or no, he looks like he’s the luckiest guy in the world, and I would agree.

“Take me out,” he commands, shifting his hand into my hair.

There’s a moment where nerves shoot through me. It’s been a long fucking while since I’ve given a guy a blow job. When I have been in relationships or had hook-ups, it’s been with women.

But I want this to be good for him, for us both. Even if I’m letting him play the part, I still have as much control as he.

“Now, Jay. Take out my dick and swallow it down,” he purrs.

I push aside my hesitation and opt for sass. “Yes, sir,” I reply.

Gripping his pajama pants by the waistband, I pull them down to reveal his thick cock. He’s long and has a good girth, but he’s not overwhelming. An image of Juliana sucking him off with me or riding him until she’s boneless flashes through my mind, but that’s for later. And, now, I ache for him to unravel and come at my touch.

Studying his cock, flashes of all the ways I can drive him wild with pleasure run through my mind. I can clearly picture

me teasing his tip, licking his shaft, and sucking on his balls. But what I want, what I *crave*, is to have him deep in me, all the way down my throat. I want him to choke me on his cock and make tears stream down my face. I want to drink down his release, then kiss him deeply so he tastes himself on my tongue.

I look up at him as I take him in my hand. Our eyes connect, and I pull forward to spit on his dick before stroking him. I take his tip into my mouth, suckling it as I tease his balls with my free hand. With every lick, caress, and fondle, he grows harder. His cock twitches in my hand with every pass of my tongue over his slit where his salty pre-cum gathers.

Lust overwhelms me and my ability to go slow is thrown out the window. Everything is just need between us.

With no warning or preparation, I take him all the way down my throat, testing my gag reflex, only to find he's perfect for me. He's long and easily hits the back of my throat, and he's the perfect thickness to wrap my lips around. I breathe through my nose, letting my throat and tongue work him over as I hum in pleasure.

“Oh fuck, Jay,” he groans, wetness pooling between my thighs where my body craves to be filled.

Griffin tries to pull back, but I grab his ass and keep him pushed all the way to the back of my throat. Slowly, I pull back at my own excruciating pace and let my lips add pressure to his shaft as I go.

My head bobs up and down his length, taking him deep each time I feel him reach the edge. I switch up the pace, going slow as I suck him and then faster to take him deep. Tears gather in my eyes as he lets loose and rocks into my mouth instinctively, and I let him control the pace now he knows I can take it.

I hear movement from behind Griffin, but I'm lost in the feeling of him and ignore it. Instead, I reach down to undo my own pants and slide a hand between my aching thighs. I'm drenched with arousal and run my fingers back and forth through my slit as I suck Griffin off.

“Griffin?” Juliana’s sleepy voice comes from the darkness.

I lick Griffin’s cock from base to tip, and he lets out a barely contained groan. He throws his head back as I switch to lightly lapping and swirling my tongue around his tip. He joins me by gripping at the base of his cock to stroke himself as I tease him, but I push him away, opting to take him deep into me again as I push two curled fingers into me.

“Griffin, are you okay?” Juliana calls out.

I spot her out of the corner of my eye as I continue to swallow Griffin. She’s crawling over Sage to get out of the bed, making her groan as she moves. She’s beautifully ruffled and sleepy in her nightgown, looking a lot like the morning after we first met.

Adorable.

Her breasts are full and falling out of her nightgown as I rock my fingers in and out of my channel, grinding my palm against my clit with each thrust. Griffin grabs me by the root of my hair, messily pulled back into its usual bun, and shifts my attention back to him. I shoot him a glare and he loosens his hold on me slightly in response, giving me just enough leash to continue working him over.

“You don’t get to look at her, you little slut. Now suck.” He groans, thrusting all the way to the back of my throat, my moan ringing through the room.

Into My Body

JULIANA

Griffin's melodic voice carries across the room as he speaks, but it's too dark to make out who he's speaking to. I trip out of the bed, struggling to get Cy to release his hold on my ankle, then go over to the bathroom to flip the switch to let a little more light into the room. Then I spot Jay on his knees, with Griffin's cock in his mouth.

Immediately, my body relaxes at the sight of Jay—home, safe—but heat blooms through my body at the sight of them together. They're a beautiful pair.

I can see the strain on Jay's face, but his whole body seems to relax as he pleasures Griffin. The dark circles are nothing compared to the ecstasy overtaking his expression as he sucks him down. Their connection is intimate, but as though they have their own gravitational pull, I'm drawn to them, their presence, their bodies.

"Do you like what you see, mistress?" Griffin asks with a blissed-out smile, his head thrown back as he revels in the pleasure Jay's delivering.

"Yes," I breathe, stepping closer to them both.

I watch as Jay takes Griffin in his mouth, each time taking more of his length. Memories of the feel of Griffin's cock in me, how good it felt, make me crave a closer connection to him. I know Jay's been with men before, but I've never seen him with anyone. And him with Griffin? It's an addicting sight.

"Do you like this, little girl? Do you like watching them together?" Cy whispers in my ear, startling me as he comes up behind me.

I didn't hear him get up, his movements were so silent, but suddenly he's behind me. Cy wraps himself around me, and the warmth of his body stokes the flame of lust already building in my core. I look back at him, his features dimly illuminated in the soft light coming from the bathroom. The scruff of his beard scratches along my jawline as he lets his lips drift up and down my skin.

"I do," I say breathlessly.

"I like those words on your lips, *dife mwen*," he says. "One day you're going to say them to me for real."

His words send a jolt through me, a recognition of the commitment he just made to me. As though forever together is already a forgone conclusion.

He nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck and nips at my collarbone, and I'm momentarily distracted from the scene before me. Cy's presence takes over every sense I have, and it's as if the world outside this room just disappears. "Say it, little girl. You don't receive without asking."

Looking back at Jay and Griffin together, I find them in pure ecstasy. Griffin's grunts of pleasure as Jay works him with solid strokes ring through my ears. My pussy throbs as I watch them together. The sight of how they connect and the pleasure they bring each other makes wetness pool between my thighs. I ache for them.

Everything in me is calling for them, all of them.

I want us to be together. I want us to have one moment where we just get to exist together before shit hits the fan. The need to feel them, to be close to them, is overwhelming. The connection I crave is so close and yet it feels impossible to ask for.

"Juliana?" I hear Sage call from behind us.

Cy keeps hold of me, but he allows me to twist enough to see Sage and Ember sitting up in the massive bed. They both look equally beautiful with the dawning light streaming in from behind them. Their hair is mussed, and they have a peacefulness to them that only comes from a truly restful sleep, something we haven't had in quite a while but managed to find together last night.

"Oh. Okay, that's a thing," Ember interjects into my thoughts when they spot Jay and Griffin by the bedroom door.

A red flush floods Griffin's complexion as he realizes everyone's attention is on him. He pushes Jay off of him quickly, and draws his pajama pants up around his hips.

“Sor... Sorry.” He blushes, letting his head drop. “That was... not okay, wasn’t it?”

“That was hot as fuck.” Jay smirks and rises to grasp Griffin by the chin. “Don’t ever be ashamed of what you want, or what you need.”

Griffin is still hard and tenting under his pants as Jay places a light kiss on his lips before turning to face the room with a smug look on his face. The tender moment passes between them makes my heart melt further. It makes me crave the same connection with each one of them.

“Jay, where the hell have you been?” Ember asks groggily, struggling to pull themselves out of the bed.

“Ugh... it’s a long story,” he says, striding toward me and placing a kiss on my cheek as he takes my hand. “Can we talk about it after we get some sleep? Looks like we’re puppy piling it tonight?”

“Juliana asked,” Sage says, like it’s simple. As if asking them to be with me is a no-brainer, though it feels like the most complicated need I have.

Jay’s red-rimmed eyes are bleary with exhaustion and his body seems to sag before my eyes with every breath. The relaxed posture he found on his knees before Griffin is now gone as tension finds its way back into his body.

Guilt sweeps through me, knowing he needs rest, that we all need rest. But lust hums under my skin and desires pulse through my veins.

But I need him; I need all of them.

“Ask, dife mwen,” Cy whispers in my ear and places a kiss to my hair. His cock presses up against my ass, and I squirm slightly at the feeling of his firmness. “Speak up, little girl.”

My mind races as I try to gather my courage.

“I want y’all to fuck me,” I blurt out, immediately turning red as the words tumble out of me. “Shit. Sorry. That came out wrong.”

I can’t see Ember or Sage anymore, but Jay and Griffin’s reactions show me their answers. Griffin’s eyes are wide and his mouth is slightly agape with shock. Versus Jay, who’s still holding my hand, with pure heat in his eyes.

“I think that came out exactly how you meant it, baby,” Jay croons.

My heart races as my mind spins. This is terrible timing and so counter to everything that should be happening right now.

“Sorry. I just...” My head tips back and I sigh in exasperation, though Cy’s grip on me tightens in support. “I want us to be together. I want that connection. It’s silly, I’m sorry. That was so out of line. And this is terrible timing. This is not the time for me to be thinking with my vagina. Ignore me.”

I try to pull away from Cy’s arms, to run away from the awkward confrontation I feel is coming, but he keeps me pinned to him. His hands run up and down my sides, never

straying to where I crave him, but setting my body on fire, nonetheless.

Silence fills the room before Sage speaks up. “No, darling. It makes perfect sense. It is not unreasonable to ask for what you need. And it is our decision as to whether or not we want to participate.” Sage pauses thoughtfully. “I think we can all agree we are a rather messy group. From my perspective, I am comfortable with all of you and have been intimate with some of you. And...” She takes a deep breath. “And, well, I want too as well.”

She comes around to stand in front of me beside Jay and takes my free hand, giving it a light squeeze.

“You do?” I ask, eyes wide.

“Yes, darling. I love you. And I feel very strongly for the rest,” she replies. “I get it. This feels like the simplest choice we get to make. It is one of the only things we control right now. You need connection with us. I do, too. I want this.”

Tears spring to my eyes, fixated on the three little words she just uttered to me. “I love you, too,” I say, reaching out to her. “All of you. I love y’all and I’m so scared of losing y’all.” I’m crying earnestly. “I just, I want us to be together.”

I’m not sure when my feelings became so certain, but when they appeared it was like everything felt right. These are the people I care most for. I love them.

The thought of having this kind of happiness ripped away from me is worse than anything I’ve been through. When

you've lived through the darkest times in your life and find a sliver of joy, of light, you cling to it. And I'm not letting go. Of them. Of this.

I'm surrounded on all sides by Cy, Sage, and Jay, but Ember and Griffin feel so far away.

"Ember? Griff? Are y'all... okay, with this?" My voice shakes as I speak, tears still dripping down my face, and I hold my breath while I wait for their answer.

"Oh shit. Hi. Yeah, I'm on board." Ember appears in front of me. "I mean... well."

"I know," I say, reaching out to them. "In whatever way you need. Just promise me we can cuddle?"

"Promise," they say with a bright smile.

I turn my attention to Griffin, and he seems frozen.

"Griffin?" I ask but receive no response.

He's not in shock anymore, and there's no fear or embarrassment to be seen, but it's like he's a little lost. He looks tense where he stands, like he doesn't know what to do next.

"Pet," I command softly.

"Yes, Mistress," he says, red flooding his cheeks once again. He glances around at the others nervously, but he still doesn't move.

"Come here."

He makes his way before me until he's standing only a foot away, the others giving him space before me.

“Do you want this?” I ask. “Nothing has to happen. You say no and we stop. We can just go back to bed.”

The tension I would have expected from the room isn't there, but part of me knows it's because of our connection to each other allowing us this peaceful space. With everyone here, nothing can penetrate the security I feel with them. Nothing can harm any of us.

“No. I mean... Yes, I want this. I just...” He trails off.

“Just what, my pet?” I ask, reaching out to him.

“What we did before?” He's shifting back and forth on his feet as his gaze turns to Sage. “When you promised... Is that on the table?”

“What I promised?” Sage asks, and I try to recall our last time together with Griffin, which feels like ages ago.

“About you and Jules... doing... what we did?” His voice has gone impossibly soft, and his cheeks are a bright red under his tanned complexion.

“Are you asking if I'll let Sage fuck my ass while I ride your cock, pet?” I say with a small giggle.

Ember bursts out in a laugh, and I feel Cy chuckling behind me. Jay just smiles as we all take in the utter shock that's overtaken Griffin.

“Yeah... that.” He blushes harder.

“Well, I for one would love to see that,” Jay chimes.

12345SEX

JULIANA

Everyone's attention is on me as the sexual tension between us mounts.

Cy runs a single finger up my spine as he steps in close to me again, then grasps me by the neck to bite at my ear, and my head rocks back to rest on his shoulder. I adore the feeling of his lips on my skin. How he caresses my sides slowly, teasing my body into vibrating with need.

“You want that, little girl? You want to be worshiped by us? Tell them. Tell them what you need,” he whispers into my ear.

His soft command would have brought me to my knees if he didn't have such a tight grip on me. Every nerve in my body is on fire, begging for attention.

“I need to be touched. I want to feel you, all of you,” I gasp as he licks at my jaw.

Ember approaches me and turns my head to face them before placing a light sweet kiss on my lips, making my eyes grow wide. “I'm grabbing towels for our messy girl.” They wink back at me as they head to the bathroom.

Suddenly, Cy sweeps me up into his arms and walks over to the bed. He places me in the center as the others surround me, each with heat and adoration in their eyes. Sage holds Griffin's hand, while Jay reaches out to hold mine. I feel naked and exposed before them, despite still being fully clothed in my nightgown.

"Please. I need you," I whine as they look on.

Jay moves first, letting go of my hand, and caging me to the bed. He leans over me, brushing his lips near my ear as he presses his hips against my own. "Oh, we know, baby doll."

Cy comes to kneel on the bed beside Jay and reaches between us to stroke over my lace covered pussy, which is already weeping for them. I can feel the dampness between my legs, and I rock up into his touch, searching for the friction I so desperately want, but he pulls away before I'm able to.

Jay lifts himself up while he drags my lacy panties down and off my legs. "You say you want to be with all of us? Well then, I want you to scream and beg for us. I want you to count each time you come, baby doll. Can you do that for us?"

I'm completely bare to them and desperate for him to the point of whining pitifully. Things switched so quickly from quiet lust to raging need, and I'm lost in my desire.

Jay pulls me to him so his leg rests between my thighs, pushing up against my cunt and giving me the pressure I need, but it's not enough. I rock against his leg, searching for friction. I want to be touched, loved, by him. By them. I need

to have him take away some of the fear that's been riding me since Sage told us about Arrick's call.

"Take what you need, baby doll. Take from me," he growls.

And I do. Gods, do I take.

I press my hips up more firmly onto his leg and feel when my pussy opens for him. Devoid of clothes, I'm dragging myself across his jeans. The rough texture of denim against my clit drives me forward, seeking more, and my wet stain marks him as mine as I rock. Jay's hands travel to my hair where he grasps me so my gaze never leaves his own. The desire in his eyes is captivating, and I lose myself to his gaze and in the pleasure that's building as I push against him, seeking release.

Sage comes up beside us, opposite Cy, and draws the bodice of my nightgown down to reveal my full breast. She takes one in hand and kneads the tender flesh, circling her thumb around my taugt nipple. The sensation zings through me straight to my clit, and I moan in appreciation.

"Do you like this, darling? Do you like when we force your pleasure?" she whispers.

"Yes. Yes, Ma'am. Please, make me come."

Her hand continues to caress and pinch at my tender flesh. I moan as her fingers trail over my sensitive peaks and push up against her touch, seeking more.

"With time, darling. You need to be patient. Let us take our time with you," she murmurs. Her words leave me wanting,

but her touch makes up for it.

My eyes scan between the three—Jay above me letting me grind into him, Sage beside me playing with my nipples, and Cy opposite her with his hand in my own as he watches me attentively.

Cy's simple circles on the inside of my wrist drive my need higher, and my breath becomes rapid with each stroke he makes against the sensitive flesh. It's amazing how such a simple touch is so erotic, how the smallest of connections with him is what's driving my entire body to seek out more from them.

“Griffin,” I beg. “Please, pet. I need you.”

“Yes, Mistress. What do you need?” I hear him say from above my head, the softness in his voice makes me melt.

“Give me your cock. I need your cock, now.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he says, scrambling off the bed to undress for me, ripping of his pants to reveal the cock Jay made so hard.

Out of the corner of my vision, I watch him reveal himself to me. His tattoos stand out against his tan skin in the moonlight, and all of his hardened muscles are on display for me. Fully undressed, he approaches me, his cock bouncing against his abs as he moves toward me. Already there is slick pre-cum dripping from his slit. The vision makes my mouth water, and I can feel a phantom taste of his salty release on my tongue.

Hungry for Griffin, I push the other's attention off of me so I can flip over on all fours and take him in hand. I'm focused only on him and his weeping cock that's crying out for my mouth. I want to taste him, to lick him until he's drowning in pleasure. But a part of me also wants to deny him.

I look up at Griffin to make sure his attention is on me, but he never strays, then back at Jay, Sage, and Cy.

"I want you to finger fuck my pussy, Jay, until I'm screaming around his cock. And, Sage? Cy? I want you both to watch."

The three smirk at my instruction.

"You ain't gotta say nothin', dife mwen. Your pussy's doin' all the talkin'," Cy growls.

I take Griffin in hand and stroke him up and down. He's already hard and wet from Jay's ministrations and he's twitching in my hand. My mouth wraps around his tip and the musky salt flavor of his pre-cum bursts across my tongue. I moan as I take him deeper and Griffin groans in response, his hand running into my hair tenderly.

"No touching," Jay barks at him. "Just watch as we pleasure her while she makes you come."

Jay's words push a small whimper out of me, but I don't pause in my pursuit. I shiver at the intrusion of his nimble fingers pushing into me. Every nerve in my body is being lit on fire by how he touches me. Jay's free hand caresses my ass

as he fucks me with his fingers, each thrust pushing Griffin further down my throat.

Jay drags his fingers in and out of me at a painfully slow pace, crooking his fingers to hit my g-spot every time he withdraws fully. He plays with my lower lips, teasing me by tracing my slit up and down before pushing his fingers back into me.

“Do you like having him watch you, doll?” Jay murmurs.

I moan in response around Griffin’s cock, which twitches at the vibration.

“Why, baby? Why do you like having him watch?” It’s less of a question and more of a request for me to unburden myself.

I pull off Griffin and look up at him, our gazes connecting directly.

“Because he can’t touch me. Only you can.”

“Yes, baby doll. Only me.” Cy lets out a grunt and Jay amends, “Only us.”

It’s then that he enters me with three fingers, and the full sensation throws me into my first orgasm. He’s completely still as I ride the wave of my pleasure. I grab for Griffin and suck him down fully, gagging on his cock as I go, but I’m not screaming, not yet. I ride out the orgasm before pulling back to give Jay what he needs.

“One, sir,” I say, gasping for breath before attacking Griffin’s cock hungrily once more.

“Such a good doll,” Jay replies.

It's not until I've settled again into my rhythm that Jay moves back into me. His fingers stroke, like plucking at the strings of a guitar, against my most sensitive place. My pussy is swollen with need, but I crave more. He presses firmly into the front wall of my channel, and I seize for a moment as my anticipation builds once more. The sensation builds in my core. I'm so close to falling over the edge, but he won't let me come.

“Please, sir. More. I need more,” I gasp, barely holding myself up as I continue to stroke Griffin.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he tsks. “What do I need from you?”

“Two. Fuck. Two.” I pant through the sensations overwhelming my body. He grins at my count, a reminder my pleasure belongs to him, to them. That they control every inch of my body and command it to their will. My body is growing limp with pleasure, and Griffin is holding me up now by the shoulders as I suck at his cock. He groans and swells each time I swallow him down, taking more of him each time.

“She looks so good taking you both like that,” Sage says from beside me.

I feel when Sage pulls Griffin in her direction, kissing him fervently as I continue to take him down my throat. “Are you going to come for her, sweetheart?”

“No, Mommy,” Griffin replies.

“Such a good boy. Save yourself for her,” Sage croons, stroking his face and pushing the hair that’s fallen into his face back. “Save yourself so you can fill her up when you come while we take her together.”

I feel the bed rise as Sage gets up, and I pause in my efforts with Griffin, gathering myself and gasping for breath. I watch her walk to the dresser and pull out the strap-on. The sight stills all of us and I feel Jay’s fingers retreat from my pussy, making me whine at the loss.

“Do you want me, darling? Do you want us now?” she asks, turning back to us. There’s a glint in her eye, a hungry one.

“Yes, ma’am. I need you now. Please,” I beg breathlessly.

All at once, everyone releases me and backs away.

Sage approaches me as Ember reenters the room with towels, lube, water, and a few other supplies in hand. They drop everything off on the dresser and come to stand next to Sage at the end of the bed.

“Here, let me help you,” they say, grinning.

Together they work to fasten Sage into the harness, all while Sage stares straight into my soul. I feel so seen by her, by all of them. The way they’ve come together for all of us makes me melt. Their consideration and the comfort they bring would be impossible to understand outside of this moment. But right now, this is everything.

“Lie back on the bed, sweet boy. My darling is going to ride you like a good girl while she takes my cock in her ass.”

Sage's voice has gone rough with lust. Her hips sway erotically as she starts to climb on the bed.

"Lube," Ember whispers as they hand the bottle over to Sage.

"Thank you," Sage responds as she reaches for the lube. Pouring some into her hand, she begins to coat the purple dildo at her hips. "Climb on, darling. Do your part."

"Yes, ma'am." I say as I go to straddle Griffin's hips where he lays.

Slowly, I lower myself down and rock my slit against his hardness. His hips jerk up in anticipation, but I press into him further, forcing his hips back to the bed.

"Goddess, mistress. You feel so good," he pants, still on edge from my earlier attention.

"Do you like that pet?" I tease him. "You do, don't you? You like it when I tease you with my wet pussy rocking over you."

"Yes," he breathes.

On my next rock, his cock lines up with my entrance perfectly. His head slips in and I groan at the invasion. He feels so good, filling me up, making me feel whole. Every part of us is touching, and it's like we've melded into one person, one being.

I push down onto him more, and a small whine slips from his lips.

“Please. I need you, mistress,” Griffin groans to the room.

At his pleading, Cy catches me by the chin and directs my gaze at him. He’s completely bare now, his cock standing proud before him, his dark skin shimmering brilliantly in the moonlight’s glow.

I reach out to grasp his cock, and he moves closer to me.

“You want my cock, little girl? You want me to bruise the back of your throat while they take you? While they make you come?” he rumbles.

“Yes, Cy. Please,” I reply.

“That’s not what you call me, little girl.” His bark is sharp but somehow still has a hint of softness that he reserves for me and Ember.

“Yes, Mesye,” I reply reverently.

“Good girl,” Cy says, placing a kiss on my lips. His gaze is ravenous as he guides my lips to his cock. I take him down greedily and moan as he hits the back of my throat. When I feel Sage’s cock line up at my back entrance, I freeze for a moment in fear.

“It’s okay to be nervous. Just relax and keep your eyes on me.” Jay has rounded to be in front of me and his voice is so reassuring that all of my worries melt away.

When she enters me, even with just the first inch, I explode. I pull away from Cy’s cock as I scream.

“Three!” I cry.

White Lie

EMBER

Watching Juliana with the others from the foot of the bed is an experience like no other. They move like acrobats, perfectly in sync with each other. There is a call and response between them that warms me, where each need is expressed and fulfilled without question.

Juliana is on top of Griffin, riding him and chasing her own pleasure, as Sage takes her from behind with a steady tempo. Each movement of Juliana's hips pushes her back into Sage, and the rhythm they've found is captivating.

Jay is above them, circling his own center of pleasure as he watches on, all while holding Juliana's free hand and helping her stay upright. Their connection is simple, yet impossibly intimate.

My gaze connects with Cy's as Juliana sucks his cock and, looking at him, it's like the thing that's kept him unsettled since his injury is fully healed. There's contentment mixed in with his groans of bliss that he lets out as Juliana sucks him down. His fingers glide through her hair gently, and when he looks down at her, there's nothing short of complete worship

in his eyes. There's such love between them, and it makes my heart sing.

I move about the bed as they play, providing sips of water and more lube where needed. I pull Sage's hair back into a ponytail as she pounds into Juliana, bringing about her fourth orgasm while she rides on Griffin's cock.

Juliana lost the ability to speak a long while ago, only speaking in grunts, moans, and whines of pleasure. Cy comes down her throat after her last orgasm and immediately draws her up to dive into her mouth. He reaches down between her and Griffin to flick at her clit to send her into her fifth and sixth orgasm. They tangle with each other, all the while she's connected with the others. He collapses back against the bed when he's spent and strokes himself while watching the others play, even while he softens.

Juliana helps Jay come with her fingers, all the while Sage and Griffin continue to grind into her at a more languid pace. Her body shudders in bliss when Griffin comes deep inside of her, and she finally collapses into his body with orgasm number seven.

Sage pulls back to look at me with pure satisfaction in her eyes when she pulls out of Juliana, as though her satisfaction comes directly from the pleasure she inflicts on Juliana. She works herself over as she watches them together and brings herself to her own peak. When she backs off the bed, still trembling slightly, she rests her hand on my shoulder for a moment before proceeding to the bathroom.

Juliana is thoroughly ravaged by the time they come down from their high together. The woman is insatiable, absolutely voracious, maxing out at eight orgasms. The last brought about in the aftershocks wringing out her body. When I look back from where I stand at the dresser, Cy, Griffin, Jay, and Juliana are wrapped in each other, connected to one another, and I want a part of that. As though she can hear my thoughts, Juliana looks back at me and reaches out with her hand. I walk over to grab hold of her, taking her offering eagerly.

“I’ll be right back,” I say, going back to the dresser to grab the supplies I had laid out earlier. Turning back to the group on the bed, I smile, chuckling to myself. “Y’all look ridiculous.”

“Get your pretty ass over here, Ember,” Juliana jabs, barely able to lift her head from where she lays on Griffin’s chest.

“I’ll go wet some washcloths,” Cy says softly as he passes by me toward the bathroom.

I climb into the bed where Cy had been and roll Juliana off of Griffin so she’s cradled by my whole body. Slickness pours out of her, but it doesn’t bother me. I lift a bottle of water to her lips, and she gulps it down eagerly.

Sage, Cy, and Jay move about, taking care of their own needs and the others. They go about their business, pulling on fresh clothing and putting things away. Jay brings over a fresh nightgown for Juliana and a new pair of pajama pants for Griffin.

“Thank you,” I whisper to Juliana as I hold her close.

“What for?” she replies.

“For letting me be here.” I sigh. “Thank you for letting me be a part of this. For letting me take care of you.”

I can’t see her face, but I feel her body tense. Next thing I know, she’s on her knees facing me, my face cradled between her soft hands.

“Ember, you’ll never not be a part of us. Don’t ever think you’re not welcome here.” The blaze in her expression freezes the butterflies in my stomach and my shoulders relax. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I say softly, leaning into her touch.

Cy comes back to the bed, handing me a few warm washcloths. I use one to clean Juliana up and the others to wipe away the glistening sweat on her skin and brow. Then she takes one to lean over Griffin and clean up the mess she made on him as well before helping him into the pants Jay provided and then getting dressed herself.

The room smells of sex, but the vibe is so tranquil.

As people move about, there are small touches between everyone, small moments of intimacy to check in.

“I should pee. And I’ll take Griffin into the bathroom to freshen up,” Juliana says before sliding her arm under Griffin’s torso to help him rise. When she gets up, I decide to strip the bed and change the sheets so they’re clean for when everyone crawls back in. Jay comes over to help, but he gives me a curious look.

“You good?” he asks.

“What? Of course,” I reply.

“Ember, just because you’re not in on the action doesn’t mean you don’t have needs. Drop is a real thing, for all of us.”

I think about it for a moment, taking stock of my body. My body is buzzing with nervous energy and there’s a slightly unsettled feeling in my stomach. But nothing feels *wrong*, just restless.

“I think I just need to hold her, surrounded by everyone,” I say nervously. “Does that make sense?”

“Totally,” he replies simply as he changes a pillowcase.

The room settles as all of us climb back in bed. I’m in the middle with Juliana cradled in my arms again, having wordlessly crawled in to meet me like she knew it’s what I need. Jay is beside us playing with her hair, while Griffin is at the foot of the bed lightly stroking Juliana’s calf. Cy is to my right kneading the muscles in the back of my neck as he caresses Juliana’s side. But it’s Sage who seems detached sitting on the edge of the bed looking at her phone.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. Just the hospital,” she replies shakily, putting away her phone that continues to chirp occasionally as we lay there together.

The quiet is interrupted by a loud grumble coming from Juliana’s stomach.

“Hungry?” I ask.

“Kinda,” Juliana says, blushing.

I untangle myself from her warm body and crawl over Cy to head to the kitchen. When I look back, I see Cy has already taken up my place behind Juliana.

“Any requests?”

“There should be almond cake on the counter. Sprinkle it with powdered sugar and it’s good to go,” Griffin supplies.

“Ugh. Yes please. And apple slices would be excellent.” Juliana lustily groans before calling out. “And peanut butter too!”

“On it,” I say, already making my way down the hall.

Contentment fills me as I go through the kitchen gathering everything when I’m suddenly interrupted by the vision of Sage racing down the hallway, halfway dressed.

“Sage?” I call out.

“Emergency. Hospital. Sorry,” she responds, not bothering to turn back to me.

I want to believe her, but her eyes are red, and she looks tense as she rushes to the counter beside me to grab her car keys and wallet.

“Let us know what you need,” I murmur as she turns to leave.

That stops her in her tracks, and she strides back to me. She puts her phone down on the counter beside us and gathers me into her arms. Her squeeze is tight before she pulls back, but it doesn't last nearly long enough.

“Tell Juliana I love her?” Sage whispers.

“Yeah. Of course,” I say, wondering what would prompt such an odd request. “Sage, is everything okay?”

Sage shakes herself. “Yeah, everything is going to be fine. I'm taking care of it. Just... you all are my family now. Take care of them for me.”

As she walks out, the nagging feeling that something is wrong comes over me.

She didn't say she'll be back, or what the emergency was or anything. Just “Tell Juliana I love her” and “Take care of them for me,” which is hella ambiguous to me.

Whatever is going on, I just hope she stays safe.

Down

TRIGGER WARNING: Threats of gaslighting, spousal abuse, child abuse, and family annihilation.

TLDR: The following is a text thread where Arrick threatens to harm his son and Sage's partners then manipulates her into agreeing to meet him.

8 :11 a.m. Unknown: Little flower, just come home.

8:11 a.m. Unknown: Please.

8:12 a.m. Unknown: Kieran misses you.

8:12 a.m. Unknown: I do too.

8:13 a.m. Unknown: Our flight leaves in twelve hours. I hope you'll join us.

8:27 a.m. Unknown: I know you're reading these. Just answer my fucking messages.

8:29 a.m. Unknown: I'm sorry, babe. I'm just worried about you and I miss you. Don't you want to be a family again?

8:38 a.m. Unknown: How dare you leave your son like this. He will never forgive you for this. I'll make sure of it.

8:39 a.m. Unknown: You've always been a bitch, you know. All you ever cared about was your job and the fucking kid. I

should have never married you.

8:39 a.m. Unknown: Even worse, you're throwing yourself around with those people like a whore.

8:40 a.m. Unknown: You don't understand the sacrifices I've made to love you. Sacrifices they could never make for you. If you don't come back to me, I'm coming for those whoremongering pricks. I'll make you grieve each one in turn.

8:44 a.m. Unknown: Say goodbye while you can.

8:57 a.m. Unknown: You fucking cunt. ANSWER ME.

9:13 a.m. Unknown: Fine. You want to cut yourself out of our lives? Then I'm cutting Kieran out of yours first.

9:13 a.m. Unknown: I'll throw him out like the damaged cargo he is.

9:14 a.m. Unknown: Enjoy your son's fucking funeral, you cunt.

9:14 a.m. Sage: I'm on my way.

SHE

JULIANA

I wake alone to the smell of something delicious coming from the kitchen. Glancing at the clock, I notice it's almost noon and realize we must have fallen asleep after our activities together. I groan and drag myself out of the now empty bed to shower and get dressed in pursuit of whatever mouthwatering smell has permeated the air.

Following the smell of food, I enter the kitchen and am greeted by the sight of my people dispersed throughout the room, eating and laughing along with Ash, Rosie, Charlotte, and the others from the Ascendancy Collective. At the moment it's like nothing exists outside of this room. Later we'll get back to reality and dive into the mess that is our lives, but for now, I'm just going to enjoy this.

"Hey, baby," Jay says, coming up behind me and placing a kiss on my hair.

"Hey," I reply, leaning back into his strength.

Griffin passes by and hands me a mug of coffee with the perfect amount of creamer, letting his fingers trail across my own as he walks back to the kitchen island. The small smile he

gives to Jay and me leaves my knees weak, and if Jay weren't holding me tightly, I'd be on the floor in a puddle.

"Mhmm. You smell delicious," he murmurs into my ear as I bring the mug up to my lips to take a sip.

"Thanks. I showered." I giggle and feel a grin spread over his face.

For a moment, we just stand there like that together. I take in the bustle around us as I enjoy the rich aroma of my coffee and the warmth of Jay wrapped around me, but there's a gnawing at the back of my head saying something is off.

Turning slightly to Jay, I ask him the question that's been on my mind. "What the fuck happened to you by the way? You disappeared and then you're back and well, you know."

"What, back and on my knees sucking Griffin's cock?" he whispers into my ear.

"Yeah, that." I blush.

Jay sighs and leads me to sit down at the bar of the kitchen island. As though they understand the importance of this moment, the others in the room quiet.

"Gus called me the other night," he begins, glancing briefly over to Charlotte who seems to be absorbed in her own world at the table. "He said there was someone at the Cypress club looking for me and that I needed to come as soon as possible. Y'all were doing your own things. So, I just snuck out thinking it was going to be a short errand."

Griffin scoffs, having been drawn into Jay's story and inching his way closer to where we both stand. I reach for Jay's shaking hand as he gathers himself to continue.

"Yeah. Well, clearly that didn't happen." Jay snaps before taking a deep breath to calm himself. "Instead, I drive the fucking hour and some-odd to show up to the club and the fucking FBI are there."

"I'm sorry, what?" I shriek, making several in the room jump.

While the others have stayed where they were originally, Cy and Ember have come to join Griffin, Jay, and I at the island bar, offering their silent support. Exhaustion takes over Jay, and I can see the strain all of this has taken on him. He leans into the bar heavily for support, squeezing my hand grasping his own.

"Long story short. Evidently Arrick and his operation are on their radar now. And it might be partially because the Chad douche-bag, John Higley? Well, his body showed up in a lake somewhere," he starts to explain.

I let go of Jay's hand, turning to face the center of the island in hopes he won't be able to see the fear building in my chest at the mention of the FBI's involvement. Absentmindedly, I pick up the phone sitting next to my hand and play with it to expel some of my mounting anxious energy. I focus on how it twirls between my fingers as I fidget and spin it, a part of me calming as I focus on the repetitive motion.

He continues, “They did some digging and found out about his trip to Bliss and they had questions. So, I may or may not have been in their custody while I was gone.”

My jaw is simultaneously tight with anger and dropping on the floor in shock.

“They hammered me with questions for hours, but I didn’t give them anything they didn’t already know. So they had to let me go.” A final sigh has my attention turning back to him and away from the phone in my hand.

“And you didn’t think to call anyone?” Ember scolds.

“They didn’t really give me the option,” he says.

Griffin huffs. “Figures, fuckin’ FBI fuckwads.”

A chorus of chaotic voices erupts with questions before the room stills when the phone in my hand, displaying the hospital’s contact, rings and startles me out of my anxious haze.

“Hello?” I answer, pressing the phone to my ear to protect the younger ears in the room.

“Hi, sorry. Who is this?” The caller asks. “I’m looking for Dr. Mathieson.”

I pull the phone back and look at the case, realizing this must be Sage’s phone.

I bring the phone back to my ear before answering the caller, “Oh, this is Juliana. I’m a friend of Sage’s.”

“Okay.” They sound torn. “Is Dr. Mathieson with you? We need her to come in we have an update on the recently deceased patient she requested labs on.”

“Oh. Well...” I look around, my worry mounting as I don’t see her amongst the others. “She isn’t here. She must have stepped out. Sorry.”

“If you see her, can you let her know Nurse Yang called?” Their voice trembles a little and grows quiet. “Tell her... If I’m reading her lab requests correctly... I think she’s right.”

The sound of alarms blares through the phone, and I have to pull it away from my ear for a second.

“Sorry, I have to go. Please, have her call me as soon as you hear from her,” the nurse urges.

“Yeah, of course.” I bite down on my lip, dread filling me as the line hangs up.

I stare at the now dark phone in my hand.

“Guys,” I call. “When was the last time anyone saw Sage?”

“Last night, why?” Says Ember, who’s been smearing a bagel with cream cheese nonchalantly as the world is caving around us. “She said there was an emergency at the hospital and she had to go.”

The ball of nerves in my stomach tightens at Ember’s words.

“Well, that’s odd. Because that was the hospital and they’re looking for her,” I respond with a bite in my voice. “So she’s

definitely not there.”

All eyes in the room snap to me and immediately the room chills. Even Charlotte’s attention has been dragged away from what she was doing at the table.

“Isn’t that hers?” Jay asks, pointing to the phone in my hand.

“Yeah. Do we know her password?”

“Try ‘Kieran,’” Ember offers.

I type in the code and the screen unlocks to her most recent text thread from an unknown number. My eyes go wide as I read.

“Oh, fuck no,” I growl, my hand clenching tightly on the edge of the island now holding me up. “I’m gonna fucking kill her if she’s trying to pull some self-sacrificing shit.”

I hand off the phone to Griffin and Jay, who both stand beside me. Jay grumbles out a “fuck” at the same time Griffin let’s out a longer string of expletives under his breath as they read through the texts.

“Change of plans, friends.” I turn to the members of the Ascendancy Collective scattered throughout the room. “We’ve run out of time and shit needs to go down now.”

I’m met with a lot of confused faces, but Griffin and Jay fill them in.

“Arrick threatened our lives,” Griffin starts. “And then Kieran.”

“Sage went to meet him,” Jay finishes.

“Shit,” Cy grumbles, already striding to the door as though he can just catch up to Sage before she leaves.

Everyone moves all at once, but Ember catches their attention with a loud whistle. “Before we scramble like a chicken with its head cut off... Do we have enough of a plan to act now?”

“Does it matter?” I ask, my anxiety growing by the second.

“I mean... kinda,” they reply.

“I have all the supplies I need,” Lux pipes up. “I packed everything up last night. Say the word and I’m ready to go. I’ll need an hour to get the place ready to burn.”

I look around at all the faces who have come to mean so much to me and our new friends. I’m asking them to walk into the fires of hell for me, for my pain, and my family.

“Y’all are good with this?” I ask.

I’m met with nods and grunts of confirmation.

“Alright then, Rosie can you stay with Charlotte and Spencer?” I ask.

“Of course, babe. We’ll have a girl’s day!” Rosie replies cheerfully, trying to distract the young girl.

“Alright then. We’ll figure out the rest on the drive over. Wheels up in twenty.”

The group’s compliance is immediate, and everything moves quickly after that. Before I can take a full breath,

everyone is preparing. In less than twenty minutes, everyone is downstairs, loaded up in the SUVs, and ready to roll out. Energy buzzes through all of us, and I talk through the plan again with the others over speakerphone as Cy drives.

I have high hopes and low expectations for how this will go.

The others—Demi, Nox, Jaz, and Ash—are focused on helping secure the building as well as retrieving any of the women locked in the cages where I first woke up and whatever the hell Lux is up to. Gunnar is our sniper, our eyes up high, and will deal with anyone who might try to cause trouble on the outside.

Ember's goal is singular: to gain us enough time to get into the building and, if possible, be our eyes and ears in the building as we navigate our way through. Every extra minute will be crucial to get us inside and closer to our target. Upon entry, Griffin will lead the rest of us through the building to Arrick's space where we know Kieran to be located. We're hoping Sage will already be with Kieran and then Griffin can focus on getting them both out as fast as possible. Cy and Jay will stay with me to finalize things so Sage and Kieran don't have to witness any more than they have to.

Me?

I've set myself down this path.

This ends today.

Vendetta

EMBER

Arrick is so close and yet our end goal feels so far away.

There's a part of me which knows where all of this is headed—Arrick's death at Juliana's hands—but another part of me refuses to acknowledge the kind of violence coming from someone so sweet, despite what I've already seen her do. It's her decision to make, though, and she's committed. To her, there's no turning back.

The cans of gasoline in the back of the SUV are proof enough.

I barely notice the rocking of the car as we stop in the parking lot of an abandoned warehouse a few blocks away from the compound. Knowing what Lux has in her bag, we'll need the distance, eventually.

I'm still typing away on my computer when my door swings wide, revealing Juliana. She's clad in black from head to toe—leather pants, a tight corset showing off her soft curves, and combat boots with a slight heel that make her seem more imposing than her normal stature would. It's a more

provocative outfit than might be appropriate for the situation, but who says you can't look hot as hell on your way there?

“You ready, bestie?” Juliana smirks.

“Yeah, almost,” I reply, closing my computer and glancing at my watch, noting the time.

2:13 p.m.

We don't have the cover of night to do this like I would prefer, and it's dropped a huge weight on my shoulders. If I'm fast and all the preparation I've done works, it shouldn't take more than five minutes to break into the system. If everything goes right, I should be able to give us a solid ten minutes at least to get into the building less interference and make it to Arrick's office. Having to do it without a direct plug-in to the system adds a few minutes to the time it will take me, but based on everything I've been able to determine with the help of some online friends, I know I can do it.

I hope.

And Lux gave us an hour, starting at my systems shutdown, to get in and out before she does her thing.

Crawling out of the car with my bag and computer, I'm met with the tense faces of our group. My friends from the Ascendancy Collective are laden with their supplies and weapons, and they all wear serious faces saying they're taking no prisoners today.

But my family shows a little more range.

Cy's training won't allow for anything other than pure calm, even if his ticking jaw is a dead giveaway he's on edge as he double checks his firearm and the contents of his backpack. Griffin looks surprisingly put together as well. He's no longer the puppy-eyed boy who wears his heart on his sleeve, and for the first time, I can actually imagine how he survived undercover for the past four years. Jay looks on, twirling a butterfly knife between his fingers. Even if I didn't know he had six bottles of accelerant in his backpack I still wouldn't fuck with him.

It's Juliana making me the most nervous, though. She's clearly wrestling with herself, pushing down whatever innate reaction she has to being back here. Her hands clench and unclench repetitively before slipping into the same tapping pattern of her fingers as I've seen before.

Tossing my bag over my shoulder, I walk to stand next to her as I address the group, letting my hand brush her own with how close I stand to her. "Okay. I know we're kind of winging it, so the best I can give us is ten minutes in the dark before they catch on."

"Fine. Enough time to get in," Cy says curtly, not looking up from his pack.

"Yeah. Well, the problem will be once we're inside," I snark back at him. "You have to understand, there's a trigger in the system that will block me out the second it catches up to what I'm doing. So we'll be in the dark once those ten minutes are up."

“Meaning, we won’t know anyone’s movements or location after the system goes down. Catch,” Nox clarifies as they join us from where the other two SUVs are parked and toss Jay another canister of unknown chemicals.

“Exactly,” I reply.

The group grows quiet. Everyone knows what we’re walking into and what’s at risk, but no one wants to say it out loud.

“There’s still time to back out,” Juliana says with the smallest tremor in her voice but fire in her eyes.

She looks at each of us individually, gauging our commitment to the cause. But no one is backing out now.

“Nope. Not anymore,” Lux chimes cheerfully. “You have me standing here with a bag full of high-grade explosives and itchy fingers. I’m coming with.”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face.

These people, my friends, my new family, they’re an incredible group. We’ve never needed them quite like this before, but here they are, ready and willing.

“We have each other’s back,” Jaz says after stuffing a final knife into the holster on their ankle.

“Alright, enough of the sappy cliches,” Jay interjects a little too enthusiastically. “Onward, godless soldiers!”

:21 p.m.

2 Approaching the compound on foot makes me nervous, but it's our only option. As we reach the outer gate, I pull out my computer and quickly shut down the system before stuffing it back in my bag and setting a timer on my watch.

Let the countdown begin.

Ten.

The outer gate unlocks, and we make our way through quickly, teams dividing up to take the front and back entrances. Pressing ourselves up against the building, we wait a breath before one of Arrick's men comes bursting through the front entrance. Griffin incapacitates him with a swift hit to the head using the butt of his Glock. Jay eyes the man with a terrifying smile on his face, but Juliana is already pushing him forward to follow behind Griffin, with Cy and me bringing up the rear.

Nine.

Strategically we move through the building. Our small group is focused on finding Kieran and Sage and, though Griffin is expertly leading the way, we still take every corner carefully.

Eight.

Cy has the pleasure of knocking out two guards, and Jay assists with slitting the throat of a third.

Seven.

I can tell we're getting closer to Arrick's office by how Juliana's shoulders continue to tense and rise as we move through the building. It's as though she's recalling her surroundings and her body remembers knows what's coming. Though, she still gets in a shot at one of the guards who come up behind us that takes him out. The kill has Jay making a terrible joke about her being one kill-shot away from becoming a serial killer.

Very funny.

Six.

When we turn a final corner, Griffin stops just in sight of the door to Arrick's office. Juliana is frozen behind him and, without seeing her expression, I know she's fighting her own memories.

Without a word, Cy holsters his gun and wraps his arm around her waist. She relaxes into his touch, and I marvel at how far they've come together, how in tune with each other they are now. When he looks back at Jay and me, I know exactly what he's thinking. No matter what happens, she gets out of here safely.

Five.

Once at the door of Arrick's office, I take a glance at my watch—2:38 p.m.—and say a silent prayer they're in there. That this is all worth it.

My body buzzes with adrenaline, so I take a few deep breaths to steady my hands. I may be good with a computer,

but I'm just as deadly with a gun as the others.

The five of us line both sides of the door, readying ourselves for what's to come. Griffin lets off a single shot at the door lock and swings it wide.

Four.

Immediately, shots ring out from the doorway and bullets come flying. Griffin and Cy take the lead with firing back.

"Three men," Cy calls to us as he withdraws after firing off a shot. "One left and two right."

Another bullet comes flying by, chipping the doorway on its way, and with impeccable timing, Cy is immediately in the entry firing back and taking out the first of Arrick's goons in the room.

High pitched screams, barely muffled as though coming from another room, pierce the air.

Kieran.

Three.

With one man dead, firing from inside stops and everything goes silent outside of Kieran's screams. If I was counting shots correctly, their magazines should be out, and if they're unprepared, they won't have backup.

Griffin takes the first step into the room and is immediately met by a man with swinging fists. He seems taken aback at Griffin's appearance, though, and he loses his advantage. Griffin tosses him off quickly as the second goon approaches,

and Jay takes the liberty of slitting the man's throat, his blood joining the stains of others on the concrete.

The final man is disposed of just as swiftly as the others with one uppercut punch to his jaw by Griffin and a shot square in his chest by Cy.

Two.

The second I'm through the door, I spot Kieran and Sage on a cot across the room and race over to them. Kieran has his eyes shut tight to block out the carnage and Sage, wide eyed, is covering his ears as best as she can while holding him tightly. As I approach, her focus never leaves my face.

"Hey," I say, taking them both into my arms. "I've got you. You're safe now."

The chaos has died out and the room is silent for a second while the reality of everything settles.

"Sage, where's Arrick?" I say, glancing at my watch.

One.

"One minute until everything is back online," I call out.

"Fuck," Cy curses from across the room.

"Sage," I say calmly, drawing her attention away from the others and back to me. "Where. Is. Arrick?"

She takes a second—one we barely have time for—to gather herself. "Behind the door," she whispers, nodding toward a door across the room. "He shut himself inside when everything went dark."

“Cy!” I yell. “Behind the other door.”

Zero.

The beep of my watch rings through my ears, shattering my hope for a swift resolution to this mess.

“Fuck!” Cy shouts, banging his fist into the door. “Locked.”

My head drops. “Yeah. The system re-engaged.”

Juliana and Jay look between us, confused, but Griffin’s expression is most concerning. He’s waiting, but for what, I’m not sure.

“Welcome back, Juliana.” A voice echoes through the room—Arrick’s voice. “And friends. You finally made it, didn’t you?”

A chill runs up my spine as he addresses the room, the surround sound of his voice adding to the fear he’s trying to provoke.

“Cover your ears, Kieran,” I murmur, turning back to Sage and the boy before getting Griffin’s attention. “Griffin, can you get them out of here?”

My heart is still racing, unable to slow down, when he comes over and takes Kieran into his arms. He kicks and thrashes, but Griffin only holds him tighter, and slowly Kieran relaxes into his hold with his head buried into Griffin’s shoulder.

“Go on,” I say to Sage. “We’ll take care of the rest.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, Sage. Little flower, there’s no need to leave.” Arrick’s voice drips with venom as it comes through a speaker system hidden throughout the room. “We just found each other again.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole!” Juliana rages to the ceiling.

Horror splits across Sage’s face as she takes in Arrick’s voice, but when her gaze connects with Juliana’s, the tension is gone. With Kieran tightly clinging to Griffin, Sage crosses to her and takes Juliana tightly in her arms.

“Where is he?” Juliana practically growls as she holds Sage.

Backing away, Sage glances to the doorway behind Cy. “In there. We heard when the system went down, and he locked himself in there and left us with the guards.”

“Got it.” She places a kiss on Sage’s cheek. “Go with Griffin. We’ll deal with this.”

Sage nods before following Griffin out of the room quickly, avoiding the bodies lying on the ground.

There’s an eeriness to the air, with only the four of us now. The vibe is wrong.

Cy motions for the group to join him beside the door, and I pull out my computer to see if there might be a way to trigger the lock to disengage.

Unable to stop himself, Cy calls through the door with a wolfish grin. “Little pig. Little pig. Won’t you let us in?” knowing Arrick can somehow hear us through the thick door.

“Did you really think it would be easy, Juliana?” Arrick mocks. “Did you think I would cave into your demands so readily? Just hand myself over?” A cackle comes through the speakers.

“Only a coward hides behind locked doors like this, you bastard,” she snaps, tension building in her body at Arrick’s every word.

I count in my head as silence envelopes the room.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Then a click of the lock door permeates through the room.

“You make a fair point, Juliana. We all deserve the chance to face our demons,” Arrick rattles out. I should be shocked when the door swings wide, but with the audacity of Sage’s ex, it really doesn’t faze me at all. “How are you faring, by the way? Did you come back for more? Is that why you’re here?”

All four of our firearms are trained on the doorway. And Cy and Jay both tense at Arrick’s appearance with his gun pointing at Juliana.

Murder is written on Juliana’s face.

“You just couldn’t stay away from me, could you?” Arrick goads her with his gun raised in her direction.

I see the moment she snaps.

“Oh, fuck off,” Juliana groans. A shot rings out from her gun and straight into Arrick’s shoulder. “I’m so sick of listening to your bullshit.”

Let It Burn

JULIANA

Anger burns hot in my veins as Arrick cries out in pain. I was really aiming for his chest, but hitting him in the shoulder of his firing arm is not a bad end result.

Unfortunately, my aim causes a trigger reaction and Arrick's gun goes off. Somehow, Arrick still has a hold of his gun, which seems to be too heavy for his injured arm as it droops a little lower each second he remains standing.

"Fuuuck," I hear Ember's cry from behind me and I realize the bullet from Arrick's firearm must have hit them.

"Mmmh. How unfortunate. I missed," Arrick says as though the shot was intentional.

"Shit. Ember, are you okay?" I call behind me, keeping my gun and eyes trained on Arrick.

"Yeah." Ember groans. "I'm fine. Just a nasty scrape. But I'm gonna leave y'all to deal with him. I'm going after the others."

I call over my shoulder. "Just be careful since you're by yourself."

“Yes, ma’am,” they say as they depart, and I hear their footsteps recede.

It’s just Cy, Jay, and me left alone with our target now.

Arrick’s gaze never leaves me, so he isn’t tracking Cy’s movements. I watch him carefully, how he stalks to perfectly position himself behind Arrick. I try not to draw attention to him, but I can’t help myself, and a quick glimpse over Arrick’s shoulder gives Cy away and he starts to turn.

In a swift—almost choreographed—sequence, Cy grabs Arrick’s injured arm and twists it behind his back, using his already twisting momentum to force Arrick to face him. Another gunshot goes off from the barrel of my own Staccato XC, and Arrick screams in pain. There’s blood running down the back of his pant leg around his knee, and it brings him to the ground.

“Well, that wasn’t very nice of you,” Arrick grunts through his gritted teeth.

“Yeah, well, ‘nice’ used to mean foolish, so yeah. I guess it really wasn’t very nice,” I snap.

Cy stands above him, holding him in place and pressing into the wound on his shoulder, which I can’t imagine is anything but painful.

“Fuck you,” Arrick growls through the pain.

Somehow, seeing Arrick on the ground like this is empowering. The roles are reversed and for the first time in a long time, I feel like I have some semblance of control back.

“Nah. Fuck you, bourik,” Cy says. “You’re the worst kind of coward. You don’t fight your own battles. You let others die for your selfish cause.” He leans into Arrick and starts to press him back into the floor, forcing him to bend at the knee where blood gushes out rapidly. “And you’re weak. You rely on fear and manipulation to get what you want. But that’s not happening this time. You’re not sweet talkin’ your way out of this.”

“Heads up,” Jay says, tossing a pair of handcuffs to me as I stride up behind Arrick.

Reassured by the image of the powerless man on the ground and the tight hold Cy has on him, I flick the safety on and holster my gun before reaching to bring Arrick’s arm down out of Cy’s twisting maneuver and secure the cuffs around his wrists.

I hear the scraping of a chair being dragged and turn to see Jay pulling it to the center of the room. He has it positioned right in front of the column where Arrick kept me captive.

“How did you?” I stutter. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” he asks me with a furrowed brow.

A laugh comes from Arrick. “It’s where I kept her. She was mine and I kept her on display right there, you imbecile.”

Cy plunges his thumb into the bullet hole in Arrick’s shoulder, and the man lets out a deep groan of pain. “Shut the fuck up, old man,” he growls, drawing his gun and holding it to Arrick’s head.

Arrick freezes.

“Cy, no,” I command as forcefully as I can. “He’s mine.”

Reluctantly, Cy draws his weapon back to hold it loosely at his side. “Estipid chans. Be grateful I love her.”

My attention snaps up to Cy and see a blush forming on his cheeks. “You love me?”

“Wi, dife mwen. Mwen renmen w plis pase lè,” he says softly.

Tears spring to my eyes. I only understand the first part, the most important part. *Yes, my fire.* He loves me. The rest doesn’t matter right now—I’ll coax a translation out of him later.

“Awe. How swee...” Arrick starts, but Cy clocks him with the heel of his gun, not knocking him out but incapacitating him a bit.

“Gettin’ real tired of hearing him ramble,” Cy gripes.

“He was like that when I was here, too,” I say softly, almost to myself, though I know Jay and Cy hear me. “He loved a good villain monologue.”

Jay’s hand is suddenly resting on my lower back. “Well, I for one hope you return the favor. He could use a good lecture.”

Looking back at him, I see the sympathy in his eyes, but it doesn’t hurt like I would have expected it to. There’s no pity there. Instead, it’s supportive and kind.

From his free hand, Jay—ever the good little scout—shrugs off his Mary Poppins backpack and pulls out lengths of rope and chain to hand to me. “Do you want to do the honors, baby? Tie him up while we get everything ready.”

“Yes. Thank you.” My reply is soft in the room.

Cy picks up the half aware man from the floor and tosses him into the chair, a throne perfectly positioned for a man undeserving of his self-appointed crown. My hands shake as I approach him. Even though he’s cuffed, there’s a part of me that still fears him. But that ends today.

This man deserves a fate worse than death, and for him, I’ll be exactly that.

As I secure Arrick to the central pillar—the same one that haunts my day and nightmares—Cy and Jay drag items from around the room to create the makings of a bonfire. They push the wooden desk behind the pillar and drag the cot along with its blankets and pillows beside Arrick. Every piece of flammable material in the room is compiled around him.

Jay pulls out the bottles of accelerant from his bag and lays them out on the ground. But he keeps going, pulling out additional instruments I didn’t realize we brought.

“Awe. Jay! You brought presents!” I tease, trying to cover my nerves with humor.

“Happy holidays, baby. I hope you like it,” he jokes, coming to kiss me on the cheek when he’s finished laying everything out.

With everything set up, the three of us stand back to admire our work. Arrick is beautifully tied up against the column where he kept me, and the image feels *right*. I don't know when this became the plan, but it felt like an appropriate end for Arrick.

My own devil—the man who gave me my demons—finished by fire.

When we're finished with our preparations, Cy goes before the bound man and leans into his space. "Bourik, wake up."

Arrick groans in response. His body seizes up when he realizes how he's being detained. I see him take in the bottles of accelerant and other instruments Jay brought on the floor. Then he notices the pile of flammables around him. His eyes grow wide and, for the first time, I see fear in him.

Turning to Cy and Jay, I ask, "Can I have a few minute before we leave?"

We know the plan. We're prepared for this, and for the consequences that may come. Their support means everything to me, but I need to do this part alone. And though this probably won't bring me any more peace, it feels necessary.

I need closure.

"Of course, dife mwen. But if you're not out in forty-five minutes, I'm coming for you." His hand grasps my own, and the touch sends relief through my body.

I've come so far with Cy. Since the beginning, he has been a steadying presence for me. Having him open up, and the way

we've grown close, means more to me than he may ever be able to imagine, though he shows me the same in little ways.

Like holding my hand when I'm scared.

Because I am.

Scared, that is.

But there's no turning back, and I don't want to. I don't want to go back to how things were before my kidnapping. I don't want to leave this new family I've found. I don't want to resume whatever shell of a life I led before, no matter how fulfilling I thought it was at the time.

Change is hard if you let it control you. But if you focus it and channel it? Change can be a miraculous thing.

"I'll be out before you know it. I promise." I kiss him tenderly, and the warmth of his lips on mine settles some of the nerves twisting in my chest. "I love you."

"And I you, dife mwen," he says, placing a kiss on my hair.

Jay approaches with one of the containers of accelerant in hand and places a kiss on my cheek before handing me the bottle. "Give him hell, baby. Love you. Always and forever."

Both of them give me a final reassuring glance before turning to leave.

While my heart longs to leave with them and put this all behind me, my soul needs something else. There's still business to be settled with Arrick, and I'm not leaving until it's done.

A deep groan from the man has my attention turning back to him.

“Welcome back.” I sneer.

I let Arrick sit with his own mounting terror, flicking the safety on and off of my gun. I observe him as he pulls himself out of his dazed state fully. He is bloodied from his gunshot wounds, and when I have my way, he’ll be within an inch of his life. Already I know I won’t regret a single moment of torture he will endure at my hands. His pain is my pleasure, and he deserves every cut and punch and bruise I deal him.

“Hoo da fuck...” he slurs. “You thin’ ya are, ya whore?”

I can’t help the laugh bursting out of my chest. “You were my nightmare, you know. I’m just returning the favor.”

His head flops to the side as he takes me in, and I feel the need to get everything off my chest. Therapy is great, but this is better.

Grabbing one of the knives Jay brought with him, I approach him, steeling myself for the encounter. With him bound, I don’t fear he could hurt me. No, I only fear I’ll break in front of him.

“You broke me, you know.” I chuckle to myself. “Congratulations on that, by the way. It’s hard to shatter someone’s sense of self into a million pieces, but that’s what you did.” I twirl the knife between my fingers as I walk toward him, studying every breath and movement he makes. “You

wanted to destroy me and everything I hold dear, and you did.”

“It was easy. Always is with you sluts.” He huffs, though I can hear the tremor in his voice he tries to hide under the same malice I remember from before.

I hum. “You would think that, wouldn’t you? You think of yourself as a predator and I’m your prey.”

Arrick is fastened to the same column where he kept me captive with chains. His hands and feet are bound. The room is a stark reminder of what I endured here, and I struggle against the flashbacks threatening to surface, but this isn’t the time. I take a few breaths to ground myself, closing my eyes as I breathe in and out.

“Your mistake, though, was underestimating me. Your ego got ahead of your own capabilities. Sure, for a while. I was completely broken. I have a theory about why you chose me, but let me tell you why I’m choosing you in return. “

I tilt his chin up to face me with the tip of my knife, forcing him to look me in the eye. His eyes are bloodshot and glassy with pain. Tears and blood streak his face, but he looks empty, resigned, the fear from before having fled his body. “The beauty of suffering is there’s always a choice. And though you may not have control over the situation, you maintain your ability to respond. You haunted my nightmares for months. You *hunted* my family for months. So my choice, Arrick Mathieson, is the end result of every decision you’ve ever made.”

I trail the knife across his cheek, and blood pools along the line I cut into his flesh. “Do you ever wonder what it would be like if life turned out differently?” I let the knife fall from his face and balance it precariously on his thigh. “Sometimes I wonder about what my life would look like if I’d never met you, you know.” I press down on the handle of the knife, letting the blade sink in an inch. “But the sacrifice would be too much, I think.” With each word, the knife sinks deeper and his face twists in agony. “I’ve gained too much from this to let it all go. I guess I have you to thank for that,” I say, pulling the knife out and waving it about.

Running my thumb along the blood covered blade, I consider how I want this to end.

His death is inevitable, but my freedom from him feels conditional. Like everything hinges on my next decisions.

I turn back to where Jay laid out the supplies and trade my knife for a bottle of accelerant. Studying the small container, I think of the hell Arrick put me through, of how the flame of his abuse and mistreatment licked at me for months while I searched desperately for any kind of peace.

In my head I can hear the timer ticking down, knowing I probably only have five more minutes before Cy comes storming back in and takes this moment away from me. But I can’t let him do that. I need this. I need closure.

My resolve settles and my mind is made up. I gather several bottles of accelerant and start to squirt them onto the kindling Cy and Jay helped assemble. Silence fills the room as I go

about tossing liquid over every surface in it: the cot where Kieran slept, the table where Arrick raped me repeatedly, and finally the man himself who ruined me. Arrick cries out in pain as the accelerant splashes into his fresh wounds. He screams in terror when the liquid drips into his eyes and I marvel at how our roles have reversed.

“Don’t bother crying out or praying for someone to save you,” I say, tossing the final bottle onto the pile of crap. Then I pull a lighter Cy gave me from my pocket and flip open the cap. “You’ve taken hope from too many people to deserve any mercy.”

And with that, I light the flame.

Immediately his clothing catches fire and a cry rips out of his throat. He thrashes in his restraints, the rope burns away slowly, but the chains hold him in place. I back away as the flames consume him, and I stand frozen in the open doorway and watch. His screams of agony are a welcome melody to my ears and when the flame jumps from his vessel to the kindling behind him, erupting in flame, I smile wickedly.

In one day, I’ve ended more lives than I could have ever imagined. But this last one was special. It’s not revenge or even vengeance. Ending Arrick’s life is a restoration—of balance, safety, and security. His end means a new beginning for me and those I love. The people waiting outside for me.

It’s not until the smoke grows too thick to breathe and his screams of pain die out that I make my way out of the

building. The second I'm in the open, Cy is in front of me, dragging me away from the building.

"Cy, slow down," I plead.

"No fuckin' way. You're late. I was just comin' to get you. Lux texted and we're on a time crunch. We need to get out of here," he barks. "Now."

Looking back at the compound, I see smoke pouring out of the doors and windows from high up in the building. The dark gray clouds of smoke contrast with the bright flames coming from inside. Heat wafts from the building as the temperature rises. And I take quick glances behind me as I run beside Cy.

Goddess, I hate running.

The explosions are sudden but well timed. The first goes off at the far end of the compound and they cascade like dominos as we force ourselves to move further away. The last blast, the one closest to us, nearly knocks me down, but Cy reaches back for me and just keeps pulling me along.

We all knew and expected this. Last minute as it may have been, the plan was well executed. The Ascendancy Collective did their job by securing the building and providing us with the backup and reassurance we needed in order to go after Arrick. Lux clearly had the time she needed to get the explosives in place. The rough plan was to destroy everything associated with Arrick, and I'd say the quickly smoldering building behind us is evidence of a job well done.

Glass shatters in every window and comes showering down along with pieces of wood and metal. Memories from a month ago at Bliss come flooding back and halt me from moving. I'm trapped in place as I watch the building, Arrick's empire—his legacy—go up in flames, just like mine.

I shake myself from my frozen state, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders as I turn and run from the compound to catch up with Cy. That burden lifts away from me like the smoke consuming the building I'm leaving behind. Ghosts I didn't realize I have, vanished. Demons, vanquished.

I feel light, free.

Everything that has been weighing on me since I was first kidnapped feels resolved.

Except for one thing.

There's a new emptiness in the world. The hole, the gap, Arrick occupied must now be filled. I know I can rebuild my life, my legacy. But what happens to Arrick's empire? An empty throne sits at the center of all of this, and someone will take the seat.

The only question is, who?

My shoulders have finally truly relaxed for the first time in months as I walk away, and I try to focus on the fact that my nightmare is over. But as I catch up to Cy and round the corner, spotting the others in the lot across the street, the reality of the situation settles in.

I need to become the new nightmare.

I will become the devil in the dark.

Playground

JULIANA

Two years later

The room is a disaster. And considering our family suite takes up the entire top floor of the main clubhouse, that's saying a lot. All the dresses and accessories I packed have exploded into the room and drape over every available surface of the primary bedroom. Griffin has barely made a spot on the bed for himself and our dogs, Spencer and Penny. It's pure chaos.

I'm already running late—my hair and makeup having taken longer than expected—and I know everyone else is waiting on me. Jay is supposedly trying to be helpful, but I think he's really doing his best to rile up Cy, who takes his itineraries very seriously, by delaying me more. So far I've had two pairs of heels and three accessories go missing the second I vocalize my intent to wear them.

“Jay? Love, have you seen my other pearl earring? I can only find the one.” I yell from the vanity where I'm tearing through my jewelry box.

“Oof. Shatter my eardrums much?” Jay smirks from the doorway to the bathroom, holding the clippers he uses to trim his beard. “Didn't you lay everything out last night?”

I turn back to face the vanity and flip him off without looking back at him.

“Yeah, but she changed her mind for the fourth time on which dress she's wearing and switched the entire outfit

again,” Griffin says, coming to my rescue.

“Laugh all you want. It’s easy for the rest of you. Sage coordinated suits for all y’all, and it became simple. But dresses are hard... can’t I just wear black like the rest of the staff?” I whine, trying to push through decision paralysis.

“No. Absolutely not.” I hear Sage’s voice drift from the bedroom door. “This has been your baby since handing over operations to Rosie for Bliss and the other clubs. You’ve been burning your candle at both ends, trying to make this happen while keeping everything else running.”

Unfortunately, she’s right.

The FBI shut down Arrick’s legal business operations about six weeks after the fire. All the assets the company possessed were frozen. The lands, including the compound—or at least its remains—and where our newest project sits outside of Columbus were seized while they started investigating, though we made sure Arrick’s shadier dealings faded enough to slip under their radar, to the best of our knowledge.

Legally, the land held by Mathieson Enterprises still belonged to Sage and, after Rosie helped us find a ruthless lawyer, we went after it. The only reason we know it existed is because a forensic accountant who was working on the case caved to Rosie’s charms. They honestly shouldn’t have said anything to us, but one meeting with Rosie and they were done for—and now stalking her slightly, but in an endearing way.

The second I stepped on the 831.3 acres of land—a majority of it covered in bush and forestry since the Colorado River

runs through it—I saw what it needed to become. The fight took several months, but it gave us time to put together a full team of architects, engineers, and contractors ready to break ground when Sage regained possession.

Thus, The Playground Club & Resort was born.

A kiss to my shoulder tells me Sage is behind me and I get lost in her gray eyes when I look up to see her reflection in the mirror. “I will not have you hiding in the shadows all night. You do that enough during the day.”

“Speaking of which,” Griffin says, jumping from the bed and startling Spencer out of his slumber. “Ember texted and said there’s a few last-minute details needing to be sorted with the newest shipment of product. They suspect someone tried to cut corners with the bricks and cut them with something nasty. They’re having a friend run some testing to check. But I’m gonna make a quick call to Quinn just in case our contact sold the same product to anyone else, and it gets around the city.”

He comes over to where I stand, still just in my red lingerie set, and gives me a quick kiss on the forehead. “I’ll take the dogs out on my way, but I promise to be downstairs and waiting when you’re ready to start the show,” he calls behind him before exiting my bedroom with the dogs, leaving just Jay and Sage.

I sigh as he leaves and give up on my hunt for the matching earring, then I rifle through my jewelry box, looking for an alternative.

“The kids are good at the firehouse?” I ramble to Sage as I walk to the bed and reevaluate my dress options. “I know Rosie and Ash volunteered to watch them, but I still worry. It’s coming up on the anniversary of Stacy’s passing. And I can tell Charlotte is moody because Kieran’s stressed.”

“She’s thirteen, Juliana. She’s going to be moody.” Sage laughs. “But yes, Ash texted in the group chat and they’re settling down for a movie tonight.”

Jay’s huff comes from across the room where he’s attempting to tie a bowtie. “More like Kieran will watch a movie with them while Charlotte’s glued to her phone, talking to that boy.”

I exchange a glance with Sage, and smiles spread across both of our faces.

It took time, but in the past two years, our little family has found a nice balance between all of us and our roles within our family and business structure.

Griffin takes care of the kids full-time as a very proud Manny—he’s a hit with the PTA moms around bake sale season—and runs logistics for our transport network. He also stays in touch with Quinn, his former HPD buddy, and gets his help when we need a favor or someone dealt with through legal channels like bad batches of drugs being sold throughout the city.

Jay has adapted to being the dad-joke kind of father figure, like it was his destiny. He still keeps up with his bloodier extracurriculars through the Ascendancy Collective, which Cy

and Ember continue to run, but it's become more of a part-time gig since things on the morally gray side of our new business has calmed down.

Sage opened a free community clinic after retiring from the hospital and she does her part in our dealings, caring for both above-board and behind-closed-doors patients. She's been able to do a lot of good. And has kept more than a few friends in one piece after an assignment gone wrong.

Aunt Rosie and Auncle Ash—who now uses they/them pronouns—are part of our extended family. They took guardianship of Charlotte, who Kieran calls CC (for cousin Charlotte), last year and they seem happy, though they still won't admit being anything more than roommates.

After years of feeling like it was Jay and me against the world, I now know I have found my people. We've all done our part in cleaning up the mess Arrick left behind and things have finally started to settle, but tonight has me rattled.

“Do you think people are going to like it?” I ask, desperately looking to both Jay and Sage for reassurance.

“Darling, they already love it,” Sage says. “You're at 100 percent capacity and are booked out for the next three months. The club and the resort are doing just fine. Better than fine, even.”

“And all of the member profiles, we have those ready?” I say, tossing dresses off the bed one by one, searching for the perfect thing to wear tonight.

“Yes, Ember has them all in the app on our phones for easy access.” Sage interrupts my frantic searching with a gentle hand cupping my cheek, bringing me to face her. “But I know you have most of them memorized anyway.”

I take her in, looking stunning in a deep sapphire brocade suit that brings out her eyes. She’s wearing her hair in loose curls that frame her face, making her look absolutely edible. Her light pink lips draw me in and I feel myself leaning into her, hoping for a kiss.

“I just want this to be perfect,” I whine.

“I know, darling. And it will be,” she replies, half fulfilling my wish by kissing me lightly on the cheek.

Just then, Jay steps out of the bathroom and takes my breath away with how he looks in his emerald green suit. His hair is pulled back in his classic bun, and he’s replaced his standard gold piercings with special pieces to complement the silver accents of his cufflinks and tie clip. My body warms at the sight of him, and, as if knowing which direction my thoughts are straying, crosses over to me.

“What was wrong with the first dress?” Jay asks as he wraps himself around my body.

“It was too tight. I couldn’t hide my firearm under it,” I reply matter of fact.

“Baby, you don’t need to be worrying about any of that tonight. We’re all going to be there with you. No one will get close enough to do anything.”

I turn to Jay, stunned. “You’re carrying right now?”

“Of course, baby,” he replies, his brow furrowed. “We all are.”

I swing around to face Sage again. “Even you?”

A curt nod is her only response.

“Baby,” Jay purrs, “nothing’s gonna happen. We’ll take care of everything. Just concentrate on getting through the next hour, okay? Now, back to your outfit.” A sparkle lights up his eyes. “Less is more with this crowd. You could wear nothing at all and they’d love you for it.”

“You want me to wear the nude lace, don’t you?” I sigh, and Sage lets out a laugh.

“Of course he does. You can’t wear anything under that thing, which would be a dream come true for all of us.” Sage laughs again. “Maybe put on your robe for the first bit, though. Otherwise, you may give a few folks heart attacks.”

“Right. Fine. Now go so I can finish getting dressed.” I capitulate, trying to shoo them away, but they exchange a knowing glance.

Jay gives me a squeeze around my waist and turns me to face him. “First, a present,” he says, pulling out a small velvet box—too large for a ring and too tall for a necklace.

Though I know it won’t bite me, I take it from him slowly.

“We want you to wear it tonight,” Sage starts as I lift up the lid. “We all have an app on our phones controlling it.”

My eyes widen as I take in the toy, carefully nestled in the silken interior.

“Is that why you insisted on suits for everyone? I thought the pocket thing was a little excessive, but this makes total sense,” I say, wizing up to the situation.

“I plead the fifth,” Sage jokes, and it’s nice to see her smile so broadly after everything we’ve gone through.

Jay brings me out of my thoughts with a sharp smack to my ass. “Now get dressed and meet us downstairs.”

I smirk, “Yes, sir.”

When I step out of the elevator, I immediately spot Cy and Ember. They seem frozen in time.

“Fuck,” Cy murmurs, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Ember is quicker to recover and swiftly comes to stand before me with the dressing gown I was looking for in their arms. “Yeah, Sage said you were gonna need this for the first part of the night. Now I see why.”

Cy’s gaze travels up and down my body, but the adoration on his face is swept away by a frown when Ember slips the gown over my dress—if you can call it that. Made of a nude mesh material that matches my skin tone, the fabric only covers what’s necessary. White embellishments cover the indecent areas, barely, but the neckline still plunges deep enough to show of the curve of my breast.

“Fuuuck,” I hear Griffin groan from behind the duo.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Ember jokes, leading me into the lobby where guests are gathering outside the ballroom doors. “We know she’s hot. Now, moving on. We have shit to do and a party to kick off!”

The crowd is impressive.

It’s not often you see close to three hundred people in one room, and normally the thought of wading into the crowd would drain me. But tonight, the excited energy in the room only propels me forward.

“I’ll introduce you to Gunnar,” Cy says, changing the subject and leading me to one of the high-top tables by the nearest bar. “He’s one of our Ascendancy guys, but to the rest of the world he just owns a couple liquor distilleries.”

I never truly took him in before, but Gunnar is like a Nordic god, all blonde hair and big muscles. He’s facing the center of the room, but it’s like he’s keeping his eyes everywhere all at once, surveying the room constantly.

“Gunnar, this is Juliana,” Cy says, starting the introductions.

I hold out my hand to him, and he takes it gently. “We’ve met, you forgetful fuck. Nice to see you again, Juliana.”

“You as well. Um, Cy tells me you work in the liquor business when you’re not…” I stutter, but Gunnar just laughs.

“Yeah, it keeps me busy and it’s got some nice perks. Woulda thought you knew that though considering you’re my

newest contract,” he jokes, though he’s distracted by something over my shoulder.

“Right,” I laugh. “Sorry, it’s been a lot to keep track of lately.”

“Can imagine,” he replies.

The moment edges toward awkward before Cy breaks the silence, “I invited Gunnar to join the club as a member too. Figure you’ve been single long enough, old man.”

Gunnar doesn’t seem to be someone who smiles, but his lips crack into a smirk at Cy’s jab.

“Oh my gods. *You’re* the member profile Cy pushed in front of me.” My eyes go wide with the realization that Gunnar has been one of the people at the center of my plotting for tonight’s opening. “How did I not realize?!”

But Gunnar’s attention is elsewhere. I follow his gaze to the lobby entrance where a woman has just entered.

His woman.

Selene.

Or at least she will be if I have any say so.

“Would you like an introduction? My partner, Griffin, is a longtime friend of hers,” I ask, and I’m not mistaken, the big man blushes. I smile back at him. “Head up to the foot of the stairs, front and center. I’ll make it happen.”

Griffin steps up at the sound of his name and takes my hand. “I get it, man. There’s a lot to be said about love at first sight,”

he says, looking me deep in the eyes as though he's searching my soul for the piece of his own he gifted to me. "Sometimes you just know."

Cy coughs, and Ember is giggling behind their hand while Gunnar shifts awkwardly.

"Yeah, I'd like that," Gunnar says softly.

"Perfect!" I say giddy. "Don't forget, front and center."

I don't wait for his response as I tug on Griffin's arm and start walking in Selene's direction. When she spots us, she lifts up on her toes and waves hello.

"¡Lindo!" she squeals. "¡Ha pasado mucho tiempo! Gracias por invitarme. Nunca supe que te gustaría este tipo de cosas, pero te ves bien. Te conviene."

"Hola, Selene," Griffin replies with a joking groan. "Me alegra que estes aquí."

Their embrace is sweet, and not at all how he holds me in our most intimate moments. It's fond, but more like how you hug a cousin, which saves me from feeling any kind of jealousy.

"Selene, this is my spouse, Juliana," Griffin says just as Selene throws her arms around me to bring me in for a tight hug of my own.

Selene pulls back a little, but still holds me by the shoulders when she turns back to Griffin.

“El cónyuge la hace sonar como si estuvieras tratando de divorciarte de ella. Ella es tu amor puedo decir,” she says rapidly before switching to English for my benefit. “You are absolutely gorgeous. You’re a very lucky man, Griffin.”

The lights in the room dim in the lobby and the roaring conversation starts to die down a little.

“Griffin, can you take her up front? I want her to have the perfect view. I need to find Sage,” I say, winking as I turn to leave the two to catch up.

I find Sage near the back of the lobby with a handheld microphone in her hand.

“We tested it earlier,” she says, already handing it to me.

Sage gives me a once-over before giving me a kiss on my hair. “You are perfect, darling.” And then she’s turning away.

Lights go out through the room, which is just as much of a performance space as it is a clubhouse lobby, and a light finds me at the back. The room turns to hushed whispers as they take in the change in scenery.

I take a deep breath before my voice reverberates throughout the grand entryway of the clubhouse.

“Hello, everyone,” I announce, the room falling silent. Heads turn in my direction as I speak while making my way through the center of the lobby that splits for me. It’s my own personal road to my own version of heaven, though it’s someone’s hell, I’m sure.

“We are delighted to have you all staying with us. I know we have been looking forward to your stay just as much as I’m sure you have.” I’m at the front of the room and easily spot where Gunnar stands tall amongst the crowd, his gaze trained on Selene who seem to reflect the glow of my own light.

“You’re here for a reason. Each one may be different, but they’re all united in one truth: no one is without sin,” I say, running my hand down the arm of my new friend Selene before taking her by the hand and leading her forward. “Tonight, you’re entering the second circle of hell. You forsake your gods and give yourself to a new mistress, Lust.”

I reach over and pull Gunnar by his shoulder to face Selene. His hands immediately slip to hold her by her hips and she gasps as she’s pulled close to his body, her hands coming to rest on his firm chest.

“Don’t forget though,” I say, winking at Selene. “The line between lust and love is one easily crossed.” And, pulling the microphone away from my lips and leaning into her ear, I whisper, “Protect your body, but first and foremost, protect your heart, Selene.”

Walking around the couple, I approach the stairs leading up to the ballroom. All five members of my family stand before each of the doors, waiting for the cue to swing the doors wide and reveal all the revelry we have planned for our guests this evening.

I take a few more steps up to meet them on the landing, letting my deep plum satin robe fall to the ground, revealing

the lacy, barely there dress Jay selected for me.

Turning to the crowd, I take in the faces of all our eager guests. Each of them anticipates the experience of their lives, and I don't want to disappoint. Me and my family have committed every sin imaginable, but this place serves a different kind of sinful purpose.

"My fellow sinners..." I pause as a pulse shoots through my core and I hold back a moan.

Those motherfuckers.

The others throw open the doors to the ballroom to reveal all of its wonders and I take a deep breath to continue. "Welcome to The Playground."

Acknowledgments

We did it guys! It's out in the world! Finally finished!

While it may not be perfect, Devil in the Dark has been a labor of love from not just myself, but also an incredible network of professionals, friends, fans, and more. My attempt at thank you all will never be quite enough, but I'll do my best.

To my readers, you are the absolute best! The way that you all have rallied to support my books and journey as a new author has been humbling to behold. I tear up every time I think about how many people have read this story. Thank you for devouring this book, making content, and posting reviews. Thank you for screaming at me in my DM's and emails and comments sections. I truly couldn't wish for any better than y'all because you've already exceeded any expectation I could possibly have. I cannot wait to continue to share new stories and worlds with you and I hope you stick around!

Literally, what the actual fuck, Rhys. I still can't fully comprehend how I found such a wonderful friend and advocate. Your support of me and my creative endeavors has been inspiring. Even when I had (many) low moments, you

would pop up and bring light back to my day. Your insight into this story and obsession with Juliana, Jay, and the rest of the family kept me going at many points. Thank you for being your incredible authentic self.

You have been here from the beginning, Jenna. There's no doubt in my mind that this book and series wouldn't exist without you. Whether it was brainstorming, plotting, or editing for 16 hours straight, you have been there for me every step of the way. Thank you for being my friend, supporter, cheerleader, and last minute editor.

Emeric, I can't even begin to express how honored I am to have found you, both in a professional capacity and personal. Your friendship means the world to me and you have had such an impact on my life, behavior, language, and more. Thank you for using your life experiences to help authors such as myself, for being vulnerable and honest, and most importantly for holding us accountable.

I SO lucked out with you, Becca, Gabby, Owl, and Sian. You kept my creative juices going when I had nothing left to give. You brought joy on the bad days and celebrated with me on the good ones. Thank you for always being there for me and holding my hand through all of this.

Sylvia and all of the team at The Book Brander, thank you for such an incredible cover and for making my vision of Juliana come to life. Megan, I loved working with you and am so appreciative of all of your feedback that you gave throughout the process. Thank you for working with me and

allowing me to learn as I navigate self-publishing as a new author.

To my family... I appreciate you not reading this, but still supporting me in every way you know how. I wouldn't be here without you. Also... still bisexual. Don't know if you read that part in the Angels in the Dark acknowledgements.

To anyone I'm forgetting because I have the absolute worst memory and am pretty sleep deprived as I write this (last minute) I appreciate you, so much. There are so many people who have been a part of this process and each and every contribution is something I will cherish forever. Y'all are awesome and don't forget it. Also, feel free to call me out for forgetting.

Finally, to the haters, the people who leave mean or bad reviews of my work – you are so valuable to this process. Your honesty is always welcome in my space and I will never turn away someone for their feelings about my books. As a romance author, I will always choose love and that will always be the feeling I hold in my heart for every person who engages with me.

The love and support my family and friends have shown over the past months that I've worked on Devil in the Dark means the world to me. I can only say thank you so many times and this won't be the last. Thank you.

All my love,

Shannon

About the Author

author
SHANNONELLIOT

Shannon Elliot resides in Houston, TX, with her fur baby and writes romance that reflects her readers whenever she's not at the dog park dog or curled up with a good book. Evidenced by her background in theatre, she is drawn to story-telling and the creative process. Shannon believes that diverse and inclusive stories shouldn't be the exception, they should be the rule. Happily ever after is for everyone and she aims to write romances that reflect her readers.

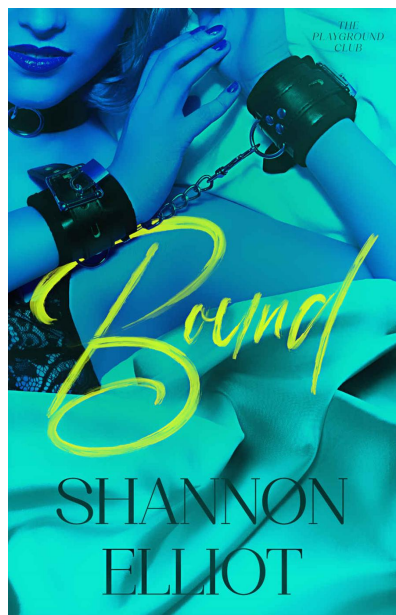
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Want to see more of Juliana and the rest of the family? Sign up for Shannon's newsletter and get the second epilogue for

free!

Also By Shannon Elliot



Bound

The Playground Club, Book One

Coming... soon-ish!

Griffin's Tarta De Santiago (Spanish Almond Cake)

IF YOU KNOW, YOU KNOW....

- 4 eggs
- 1 cup sugar (caster sugar is preferred)
- 2 cups almond flour
- 1 lemon zest
- 1/2 tsp ground cinnamon
- 2 tbsp confectioners sugar (to dust)
- Butter to grease the pan

Preheat oven to 350. Line an 8 inch round cake tin with parchment on the bottom and rub the sides with a little butter.

Crack the eggs into a bowl and add the sugar. Whisk the two together until well combined and starting to become lighter in color with a bit of air in the mixture.

Add the almond flour, lemon zest and cinnamon and mix until combined, but try not to overmix and get all of the air out of the mixture.

Pour the mixture into the prepared cake tin and place in the preheated oven. Bake for approximately 30 minutes until a

skewer inserted in the middle comes out clean.

Remove the cake from the oven and allow to cool around 10-15 minutes on a cooling rack before removing the outer ring.

Allow it to cool completely before dusting some confectioners sugar over the top.

Slice and serve or store at room temp, covered.