



diamonds

under the

Mistletoe

KI BRIGHTLY

DIAMONDS UNDER THE MISTLETOE

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The High-End Jeweler

Winter Janvier's life falls apart just when he thinks he's on top of the world. With only hours to spare, he completes a dazzling necklace worth a small fortune for the madam who operates the Courtesan Hotel. He's delighted to ship the jewelry off with a courier, then heads out to celebrate. There is only one problem: the necklace never reaches the hotel and the madam is furious.

The Ex-Cop Turned Murderer

RJ Chandler became a criminal the minute he dedicated his life to getting revenge on the man who slit his throat. The scar he carries reminds him of his new life's purpose. Unfortunately, he still needs to pay bills, so he works for the madam as an all-around fix-it man. When he is sent to bring Winter Janvier to her, he is struck by Winter's insistence that he is innocent—and his beauty. Winter swears he would never steal from the madam. RJ wants to believe Winter is telling the truth, so he promises to help find the real thief to buy Winter some time.

Uncovering the Culprit

RJ is suspicious of Winter, but Winter is sweet, which makes RJ want to help. RJ hopes he isn't making the same mistake twice; he has been fooled before by a pretty face. Will RJ get over his cynical nature to believe in Winter and help him recover the jewelry he owes the madam? Or will RJ end up putting a bullet in the man he is falling for?

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WINTER JANVIER



HOLIDAY JAZZ MUSIC FILLED MY WORKROOM FROM THE HIDDEN speakers my assistant, Van, had tucked in the corners last month so he could infect our space with “holiday cheer.” I smiled, even though my eyes burned from focusing so hard. I hadn’t been looking forward to Christmas this year because I knew I had this delicate, horrendous, beautiful masterpiece to create for Madam Winters, the classy lady who owned the Courtesan Hotel.

Critically, I studied the choker necklace as I settled it into a black storage box I’d created to cradle each jewel and keep it from moving. I tapped the gems into place and made certain the links securing them were sturdy. I couldn’t get enough of the tapered fall of white gold, lightly glazed with emerald dust and tipped by diamonds, which made up the mistletoe motif. My breath caught. I’d measured Madam Winters’s chest and the delicate point of the final diamond should nestle lovingly into her cleavage.

She was gorgeous, a classic woman in every way, and a delight for the eyes—the perfect model to show off my best work.

“I really outdid myself. She will adore this piece. That son of hers she loves to brag about better have some kids so she can pass this down. It deserves to be loved for generations. Yes, and talking to yourself is a sign you’ve been working too long.”

I held back tears as I tucked the matching earrings into a box. They were so long they would brush her shoulders if she wasn't careful, but I'd seen her walk and her posture was unmatched outside of a runway. I didn't doubt she could pull them off.

Van came into the room from the front where he'd been assisting Alton Bouchard, a big spender who I normally schmoozed, but I'd had to get this finished and tucked away tonight. The clock was ticking.

And now the work was done.

Relief swamped me and had a few tears spilling onto my cheeks, and I wiped the dampness away with the back of my wrist. Van glided across the black stone floor as if it was a stage, his steps light and bouncy. I stood from the stool I'd been sitting on for the last fifteen hours and hissed out a long breath. My back was on fire. Carefully, I straightened as Van stopped at my side, bringing the heavy scent of amber and tobacco with him. I inhaled deeply and smiled at him.

"Good job. You should go out to celebrate," he said. Van stepped closer and grinned down at me. I'd hired him because things usually got crazy over the holidays, but my shop had never been in such good shape, and I gave him a side hug of thanks. His clear blue eyes were shiny with his good mood. He gave me a real hug with both arms. Older than me by *I wasn't rude enough to ask how much*, Van had some gray in his long brown hair that curved around his ears, but he had one of those timeless faces with a sharp chin and cheekbones for days—along with a great body. People loved talking to him about jewelry here at Beaulieu, especially when he was dressed in a body-hugging suit like the black one he wore right now.

"I'm exhausted," I murmured, then covered the yawn that almost cracked my jaw.

Van hummed and his cheerful disposition was infectious. A happy little squiggle bounced around in my belly. "You need to celebrate your small wins, Winter. Besides, won't this allow you to take a vacation in January?" He gazed with wide eyes at the Mistletoe Collection. Or should I name it the Mistletoe

Art Piece? Nah, neither of those names had enough balls. It had to be better.

I chuckled and tilted my head back, crossing my arms. “I’m good.”

“You are,” Van said, smirking.

My breath caught. I would never sleep with someone who worked for me—*ever*—but the way he meandered his gaze down my body let me know he thought there might be a chance. I shook my head at him, and his smile never wavered.

“You deserve dinner.” He cradled me closer, wrapping his arms around my body, before he released me from the hug. “Good wine. Maybe someone to rub your shoulders, since you’ve been slaving away over this piece for three weeks. You’re incredible and your work even more so.”

I fluttered my eyelashes at him. “You sure know how to make a man feel appreciated.”

“I do, in more ways than one,” he murmured. “Oh, I love this song,” he said as a fast-beat version of Winter Wonderland started to play on the sound system. I shook my head and laughed.

“No one loves this song.”

He carefully took my hand, giving me plenty of time to tell him no, then coaxed me around until I was standing in front of him. He held his other hand out. “I do.”

“You don’t know how to dance,” I said softly, shaking my head.

“Only one way to find out.” He raised his eyebrows, and my stomach quivered pleasantly. I wouldn’t sleep with Van, but this was nice. A little teasing never killed anybody. I put my hand in his and rested the other one on his strong shoulder.

“Are you a natural-born flirt or do you have to work at this?” I wrinkled my nose in his direction.

Van chuckled, and we moved away from my worktable. He drew me closer with a hand on my waist that didn’t slip too low or grip too hard. Oh, he got points for being sweet. I rolled

my eyes as he began to step in time in an obviously practiced way, and this smooth talker did know how to dance, *of course*.

“The last time I waltzed was ballroom dancing at the Excellence in Knowledge Academy. It’s an all-boys school, so you can imagine how seriously everyone took the class.” He spun us around, and I laughed and held on to him, letting his better sense of timing guide us both.

“Well, you remember very well,” he said as I stomped his toe by accident.

“Liar.” I winked, unable to stave off temptation.

Van laughed, and we were interrupted by a quiet “Hello? Mr. Janvier?” from out on the sales floor. I glanced at the CCTV we kept high on the wall over my worktable and frowned. The screen was full of white static.

“Van, can you see what happened to the security cameras while I go out and talk to whoever this is?” I nodded at the doorway.

“Certainly, sir. Don’t be too long. I want to take you out to celebrate.” He gave me a squeeze that bordered on inappropriate but still managed to stay respectful.

“As work friends,” I said, softly but firmly.

He stared down at me and his smile slipped toward something self-deprecating. “If that’s all you want.”

I widened my eyes at him as my face heated. I needed to be careful or I would ruin a good thing. “I have to go talk to this customer.”

He smiled and nodded.

My cheeks boiled under the intent stare he leveled on me. Flustered, I went to the front of the shop. I channeled what was left of my energy and forced a wide smile as I stepped out into the sales area. It was habit to check the silver tables and make sure the jewelry was arranged nicely. The displays were lit by spotlights that dangled from the ceiling. Everything else in the room was a clean cream color to allow the pieces on sale

to take center stage. Simple elegance was the name of the game.

A young man with big brown eyes and a slightly crooked nose grinned at me. I immediately recognized the Courtesan Hotel's uniform for their staff—the deep red vest and black pants with a spotless white shirt underneath—and he had an uninspired black tie. Despite the foul weather, he wasn't wearing a coat.

“You poor thing! Aren't you freezing?”

He shook his head. “No, I ran up here from the car, Mr. Janvier. Madam Winters sent me over. She said you had something for her.” The smile he flashed me was as crooked as his nose, but it was charming, nonetheless.

“Darling, that woman must be psychic because I just finished the jewelry for her winter gala. How does she do it?” I slapped a hand to my cheek.

His smile stayed put, but he shrugged and shuffled his feet, glancing longingly toward the elevator door—and his escape.

“Oh, I'm sorry.” I rested a hand on his arm, and he flinched, so I stepped back. “I do know how she can be when she's in a hurry. I won't keep you waiting. Do you have something to transfer the jewelry—” He held up a leather case with the golden Courtesan Hotel logo on the front, and I bared my teeth when I noticed the handle was cuffed to his wrist. “—in. Yes, that'll do. It's not as secure as what I use, but she knows what she wants, I suppose. Who would have the nerve to steal from her anyway? Come along and I'll load the jewelry. I'm thinking of calling it the Winters Mistletoe Collection. Has a nice ring, don't you think? Since she's Madam Winters, and I'm Winter Janvier. Clever, right?”

The courier nodded and gave me a pained smile, and I decided to stop torturing the poor soul. “Follow me.”

He shuffled along behind me until we were in my workroom, and I was slightly startled because Van was nowhere in sight, but the cameras still weren't working when I

checked the CCTV, so he was probably off inspecting them. “Come over here, sweetie. What’s your name?”

“Uh. . . .” He cringed. “Pinky.”

I frowned at him for a moment and fought not to snicker. “That’s unusual. Is it a nickname? I need the key.” I glanced at the locked case. I didn’t like that it wasn’t much nicer than the typical document briefcase someone carrying some memos to an office would use, with a cheap lock on the top. Normally the cases I used were more solid, built to withstand some tinkering, and the heavy-duty locks were on the side. I glanced under my worktable at the ones I kept there, but he was already cuffed to this one. . . .

Pinky nodded and handed me a small key ring as he set the case on the worktable. I opened the lock, gave the mistletoe necklace a final once-over, and then shut it in the padded box and set it inside. The matching earrings were next. Finally, I checked over the diamond-and-emerald bracelet that went with the collection and lovingly nestled it into the case, too. With a sigh of relief, I closed and locked everything once more. Pinky seemed grateful to get the key ring back.

“You tell Madam Winters that there’s a ring I could give her to go with all this if she wants it. Okay? It’s finished and just sitting around. For her, and her only, the price is twenty grand.”

He nodded and let out a long breath. Sweat beaded on his forehead. “I’ll let her know.” His lips shivered and he pulled them into his mouth, sucking on them.

“Are you worried about transferring something worth this much?” My heart ached for the poor thing. He seemed about ready to pass out. “Listen, sweetie, I do it all the time. Just don’t stop to talk to strangers, and remember, no one knows what you have in here.” I patted the case.

“The cuffs give it away,” he muttered, eyebrows trekking higher on his forehead.

I shrugged. “Still, just go right back out to the car and don’t stop for anyone, okay?”

He nodded and gave me a big smile that made me want to tweak his off-center nose, but instead I sent him to the elevator. When I glanced at the CCTV again, it was working. I only caught Pinky's back as he was leaving, and by the time the TV hit the view at the front entrance, he, and whatever vehicle he'd arrived in, was gone.

"Good job getting it fixed, Van. I should pay you more," I said.

"No need. It was only a loose cable. Just let me take you out tonight. I always love having a handsome blond on my arm."

I slapped my hand to my chest and whirled around. The jerk emerged from the rear exit tucked behind a curtain in the corner.

He laughed as he came up to take my hand and lay a gentle kiss on the back. "What do you think? One night to celebrate wouldn't be terrible, would it?"

I had to look up into Van's eyes and my face felt as if I was standing too close to a fire. I fought off a yawn, but in the end, I chuckled and nodded.

"Yes, why not? Besides, you saved me from having to call the company that set up the security system, since I know nothing about all that stuff. I owe you."

His eyes glowed with a happiness that sent a small thrill racing down my spine. It had been a long time since a man looked at me with so much pleasure. "Excellent. I know a quiet place you might like. It's called the Zin. It's not fancy, but the wine selection is massive. There's guaranteed to be something you enjoy."

"I'm not sure about wine," I said with a laugh.

His smile slipped.

"But I'm certain I'll love it. You can pick what we drink," I said in a rush, unwilling to burst this magical bubble of happiness we were passing back and forth between us. "Okay, let me grab my coat."

“Here, I’ll get it.” He went to the corner of the room across from the curtain to the small coatrack where I’d tossed my things this morning, and my face burned again as he brought my black leather coat back and helped me slip it on. “I’ll drive, if you don’t mind?”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Thank you.” I smiled at him and sighed internally as he offered his elbow. Well, hell. Maybe mixing work and pleasure wouldn’t be such a terrible thing, would it? Especially with a man this polite. “And thank you for being here for the holidays. Last year I almost had a nervous breakdown from the stress of getting everything done alone. And most of the money I make for the year is sitting in my safe right now.” I rolled my eyes at myself and pointed to the fake stone tile in the floor that hid all that cash. Only Van and I knew where to locate it and the lock combo, so I didn’t worry too much about leaving it here instead of in the bank. If that boy thought it was stressful carrying around half a million dollars of jewelry, he should try doing it with dollar bills and see how he felt.

“Oh, I know. It’s all in there.”

“Hm?” I asked, glancing up at him.

“I’m so happy to be here, too.” Van smiled and my heart fluttered like a damned butterfly. He led me out through the showroom toward the elevator. I flipped off the light switch on the way, and I didn’t know what to say on the ride down to the bottom of the high-rise. We shared glances and nervous smiles, and as I racked my brain for a topic of conversation, it occurred to me that even though Van and I had worked together for almost two months, I didn’t know much about him.

As we exited the elevator, I used my key on the number pad, turning it so that the elevator would no longer be functional for the night. When we went out through the small lobby, I did the same thing to the lock on the glass door, then checked it. Everything was secure.

“You’re not from New Gothenburg, are you?” I asked. We stepped away from the building into the chilly December air.

Snow danced down out of the sky, and I drew my leather coat closer. He hadn't bothered with outerwear, and I realized why when we made it to his car parked nearby on the street. The engine was already running as we approached, which was a neat trick. I hadn't seen him hit the key fob on the way down. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. I could do worse than a man who thought of literally everything.

"No, I'm not," he said, opening the passenger door for me. "You know, would you like to do dinner first? The only thing at the bar will be nibbles you probably don't eat. Fried food. Things like that."

I snorted. "Oh, you're too kind. I can eat bar food with the best of them." I patted my flat abs.

He chuckled as I sat, and then he closed my door. I buckled my seat belt while he went around to his side and got in. "You look so amazing." He flashed another smile at me, and I caught a small peek at myself in the rearview mirror. My bleached hair was combed forward and to the side, and I had some five-o'clock shadow going on, but it didn't look terrible. "You must watch what you eat and work out?" He scanned his gaze down my body.

I glanced out the window, hiding a grin. "Not really. Just lucky I guess."

He hummed.

Traffic wasn't too terrible this time of night, and I watched the holiday decorations and lights fly past as he navigated downtown New Gothenburg until we were on a side street near Bar Row. It took a few minutes to find a spot to park. Again, he was a perfect gentleman as he opened my door, then walked with me toward the Zin, which was a basement bar housed in one of the older, tall brick buildings sprinkled around the area. I snickered when I noticed there was a doggy daycare on the floors above.

"What a bizarro combo," I murmured and pointed, and he chuckled.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

I didn't get another message back from Madam Winters, so I assumed she must be happy with her jewelry, and I beamed up at Van.

"Anything important?" he asked with a friendly smile. God, this man was so attentive. I'd had guys date me who couldn't get through a five-minute conversation without checking their cell phone—then had the audacity to think I would get into bed with them at the end of the night. No, thank you. Rude boys pretending to be men weren't my speed. This was shaping up to be different. Yes, maybe I was being ridiculous with my work rule.

"Not as important as you, Van. Let's go."

He nodded, and we went down the red metal steps. A man in a trench coat swayed more than seemed healthy as he held the door for us. The Zin was doing a good business for a Friday night. The stained white walls were mostly bare except for paintings of literary giants from the past. While searching for an open table I passed F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, both with manly scowls that didn't entice me to pick up their books. We had trouble finding a place to sit and ended up at the mirror-topped bar. I grinned down at my reflection, but Van didn't seem to notice the interesting feature. I didn't mind that he wasn't in the mood to discuss the décor, though, since we were served quickly. I hadn't heard what Van asked the lovely lady in a short red dress to bring us, but my head was swimming as we began to make our way through a bottle of wine before the food he'd ordered made an appearance.

"Thank you for dragging me out into the world." I rested my hand on his arm.

He flexed his bicep under my palm and leaned closer. "Anything to get you out of that shop," he replied with a toothy grin. Something about his smile wasn't quite the same as the other ones he'd been flashing me all night, and I sat

back, feeling a bit odd. All at once the noise of the bar—thumping music and laughter and talking—began to overwhelm me.

“Our food never came,” I said, frowning at the busy bartenders rushing around to fill orders. “Do you think they forgot?”

“Maybe.” He glanced up from his glass and his eyebrows shot skyward. “Let me run and go check with the kitchen. You stay here and guard my seat.” He patted my knee and lingered over the touch. His hand climbed my thigh.

“Oh—” I shoved him away and laughed as he got off his stool so fast I could barely keep track of him, then vanished into the crowd of people standing behind us. “What in the world?” I chuckled and lifted my glass again. The red wine was too sweet and flavored with cardamom and cinnamon—perfect for the holidays. The blinking strands of holiday lights strung over the bar seemed fuzzy and too twinkly.

Someone laid a big hand on my shoulder and spun around my stool. I gasped and almost spilled my wine. The man who glared down at me was absolutely massive. I whimpered as I stared up and up and up at him. If his frame was any less than six-foot-five, I would eat this glass instead of the overpriced appetizers—which still hadn’t arrived. The stranger’s gray-infused brown hair was cut shorter than Van’s, and his blue eyes were piercing and serious. His short gray stubble gave him a rugged appearance that had my tongue settling on the roof of my mouth. He tilted his head back to glare down his nose at me and my gaze caught on a terrifying reddish-pink scar along his neck.

Did someone try to murder him?

Clearly, he’d survived.

“H-hello, how can I help you, sir?” I squeaked, then cleared my throat. I fumbled to set the wineglass on the bar, and he sighed and took it from me, putting the glassware out of harm’s way.

“You have an appointment.”

I blinked up at him, then glanced around the bar. “I’m celebrating. With who? A jewelry consultation? I admit I’m confused.” I tried to recover my wits because if this man worked for someone who wanted to drop a load of money in my lap, the last thing I wanted to do was offend him. He was wearing a suit, after all, and many of the people I dealt with lived in the things.

“Madam Winters.” He dragged me off the stool with both hands on my arms and literally set me on my feet. My heart hammered and I tried not to cringe.

“I don’t understand. Was there something wrong with her pieces?”

He stared down at me, gaze impassive, and his jaw hardened. He slid his tongue along his bottom lip, and for a moment I was transfixed because it was nice and full—the one gentle thing on his face.

“I suggest you think up a good story—” He leaned down to growl into my ear. “—because she wants answers.”

My heart nearly stopped. “Oh! Did the clasp break or something? That happens sometimes. It’s an easy fix, I swear.” I babbled on about loose prongs on gem settings and links and anything else that occurred to me as he marched us through the crowd toward the front door with his hands on my shoulders. I didn’t feel very well when the cold air outside smacked my cheeks, and I didn’t like the way he wasn’t speaking. “If we stop to get my tools, I can correct any issues. I promise.”

“No, you’re going to Madam Winters because that’s my job. I bring her people who have pissed her off and stolen from her.”

My heart stopped dead for a few seconds and I gasped as it picked up pace, chugging along at double time. “S-stolen? I would never!”

He grunted as if he didn’t believe me and took me over to a black sedan waiting at the curb. He opened the rear door and nudged me inside. I slid in, then when he continued pushing my arm, kept going to the other side. He sat in the seat next to

me, and I got the idea if I tried to run away or do anything wrong, he would put an end to me—permanently. My clothes began to stick to my skin as sweat coated my body. I shivered.

The ride to the Courtesan Hotel didn't take long, and the car stopped at the front entrance with an abrupt lurch. I stared up at all three stories of the beautiful historical building in awe because while it always held an aura of glamour, decorated for the holidays it was even more otherworldly. Everything about the Courtesan shouted money, from the brick walls and pillars to the curved balconies. Multiple wings held plenty of room for guests and events. The shiny gold-and-glass front doors and the arched windows gleamed and caught the eye, and as a designer, I never got enough of the decorative molding. Red ribbons with gold trim had been affixed above every pane and the tails trailed down on either side. Off to the left of the hotel, the willow trees had been decorated in red and green twinkle lights and they made a cheerful sight—which I unfortunately couldn't enjoy, since my new "friend" opened the door and gestured for me to get out.

I shook my head.

"Move or I'll drag you," he said, but he sounded bored with the idea. He widened his eyes at me.

Sighing, I followed him into the cold night.

He frowned down at me, and I felt like I was trying to see the top of a tall building when I met his eyes. "If you just tell her what she wants to know, it will all be fine."

I blinked up at him and nodded, fully planning to do that, especially since I had no fucking clue why I'd been "escorted" here in the middle of the night. I swayed a bit as I stepped forward, and he put a hand on my back. He pursed his lips and his eyelids lowered a smidge. We didn't speak as he walked with me, then opened a door for me when we reached the entrance. He directed me to the right toward the bar, across the gleaming gold-swirled white marble floor and past decorative stone pillars that soared to the ceiling. Tonight the Courtesan overflowed with people and we had to dodge around several groups with champagne glasses in hand. I'd only been here

twice, both times to meet with Madam Winters to discuss jewelry, so I was still iffy on how to get around.

When we made it through an archway decorated with pine boughs along the top, the low blue lighting made me feel as if I was entering a dream. On my left was a gleaming, silver-topped bar, which reminded me dizzily of the Zin. A man on the stage across the way played piano for the patrons, holiday music I knew but couldn't name. Madam Winters rose from a table and her simple black strapless dress hugged her curves. Her blonde hair was pinned up in a perfect bun that showed off her neck to its best advantage—there was no jewelry on it. A small scowl tugged at her crimson lips as she marched toward me, heels cracking on the floor.

I held out my arms. “Madam Winters! You’re looking stunning tonight, darling. What did you think about—”

I gasped as her hand met my cheek. The blow stung. My face whipped to the side. I gaped at her.

“Do you know what I hate worse than anything in the whole wide world?” she asked, her Southern accent thick and eyes flashing danger.

“What?” I touched my hand to the painful spot on my face.

“Thieves. I have an event *tomorrow*. You promised me my jewelry tonight. And then I find you’re in a bar? I paid! I need everything to be perfection for that client. Where is the necklace I was promised?” Her blue eyes were colder than diamond chips.

I stared around, feeling stupid from the wine and the unexpected slap. The big guy at my side crossed his arms and glared as hard as she did. “W-what do you mean? I sent the collection over here. I gave it to you already.” Tears welled in my eyes and I couldn't help it. It felt like the floor dipped under my feet and a solid hand landed on my back. “Your courier took the necklace from my shop about an hour ago.”

She stared at me, and I fought to hold on to my composure. I'd worked so hard for so many weeks to bring that creation

into the world, and the only thing that had kept me going was the hope that she would be ecstatic over it.

“Well, shit. RJ, be a dear and bring him upstairs. I do feel a headache coming on.” She sighed and shook her head as she glided off, and I couldn’t help it. My knees trembled and I had trouble breathing.

“It’s not here, is it? The necklace. The bracelet. The earrings. None of it.” I glanced up at RJ.

He shook his head and I could see the disdain settle on his face, almost like it was a layer of dirt.

Pure fire burned through my limbs and my brain shut down. I bolted for the front door. I’d known from the beginning that I shouldn’t do business with Madam Winters—a woman who was rumored to run a *brothel*, not a hotel—and I sure as shit didn’t want to die tonight.

RJ CHANDLER



THE APTLY NAMED WINTER DARTED OFF AND REMINDED ME OF some ethereal being in his pure black clothing with his white hair—maybe Jack Frost. I shook my head and sighed in irritation, rushing after him into the lobby. He zigged left, and I zagged after him around one of the puffy red couches. The thrill of the chase caught fire in my blood.

Figures. He had to be a crook. Every time I started to feel bad for a pretty face the person went and did something to remind me of why I didn't trust people anymore. He was quicker than I would've given him credit for and easily dodged through a group of women in party dresses with apologies falling from his lips—a dark spirit surrounded by bright holiday cheer. The ladies glanced up at me in alarm as I finally began to pursue him for real, putting on some speed.

I'd almost started to believe Winter was telling the truth. This wasn't even a clever game. Who was dumb enough to take Madam Winters's money and stiff her? Even the muggers I used to drag off the street to jail were smarter. I began to run as he neared the front doors. Two other men working security closed in, but I shook my head at them because I was almost to him. I easily snatched Winter around the waist and hauled him back against my body. He gasped and trembled, going stock still. I sucked in a breath. His slim body was all warm, firm muscles and he felt better than he should've in my arms.

"I didn't do anything wrong. I swear," he said, tilting his head back to look up into my face. His beautiful blue eyes

were wide and starbursts gleamed in his pupils, a reflection of the cut-crystal chandeliers overhead. He wasn't very big; the top of his head only came up to my chin.

"Then why did you run?" I grumbled, shaking him.

He gasped and his face crumpled as if he was in pain, and I hated seeing the distress that flashed across his refined features. Sighing, I turned us toward the elevator to the left of the white marble grand staircase and used my body to push him forward.

"Because I know how these things go," he said, so quietly I had to bend closer to hear him. "Someone has to take the blame and I'm the only someone here!"

He began to struggle again. I growled, which made him behave and walk. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

He nodded.

We got to the elevator, and he was like a rock in my arms. I pushed the button and once the silver doors were open, I sort of swept him forward. I didn't mean to rough him up, but he stumbled and went crashing against the wall. I winced and went to help him straighten, but he skittered, just the same as a terrified kitten, into the corner and covered his face with his hands, obviously afraid I would beat him for real. Sighing, I pushed the button for the second floor.

He hadn't uncurled by the end of the elevator ride, so I lightly tugged on his elbow. I had no idea what was running through his mind. "Let's go, sunshine."

He shook his head. "Was that a crack about my hair?" he asked, voice wobbling.

Fuck, he sounded terrified. I didn't want to give a shit. He was in trouble, and he'd earned his just desserts by screwing over Madam Winters and thinking he could get away with it. But his shoulders shook and his breath hitched—and my stupid heart squeezed. I went down on one knee and the elevator doors closed again.

He didn't look up.

Attempting to be gentle, I tugged his hands away from his face. His eyes were still too wide and his pink bottom lip trembled.

“Tell her the truth and don’t try to wiggle like a worm out of whatever you did. Just tell her *what* you did, *why* you did it, apologize, and offer to *make it right*. She’s a criminal, plain and simple, but she respects honesty. She wants the world to make sense.”

He shook his head.

There went that awful feeling in my chest again—a terrible pang.

“I don’t understand. I really did send the jewelry over here. How could anyone know I had a delivery for Madam Winters?” He leaned toward me and seemed to be begging for answers with his whole body, especially the pout on his lips.

“You’re trying to convince me you’re telling the truth?” I sighed. “It’s a losing game, sunshine.”

“I am!”

I stood, finished with this bullshit, and jabbed the button to open the doors once more. I shoved his shoulder. “March.”

He gave me an unhappy glare over his shoulder but exited the elevator ahead of me. After a trek down several different hallways over plush carpet, we reached an arched red-and-gold wooden door.

Winter sent me a tiny frown. “This reminds me of the bold entryways in Paris. This must be Madam Winters’s room, right?”

I didn’t bother to answer, but I did knock, because if there was one thing the madam valued above anything else, it was her privacy.

“Enter,” she called, voice thick with irritation.

Once we were in the suite, it was clear things were bad. The shadows in the corners were deep because she’d only switched on one lamp. She paced around the white spindly legged couches and a tall table with a red poinsettia plopped in

the middle. Her blonde hair was down around her shoulders and a little frizzy. Her heels had been abandoned in a heap and her face was pinched—thankfully not in a way that made me worry she would ask me to take the dainty Winter and drop him off a roof.

“Sit.” She spat the word at Winter and pointed at the couch. I was happy he complied because I’d been worried that I might have to catch him from hitting the floor. His face was nearly as pale as his snow-white hair.

Madam Winters sipped from a bell-shaped whiskey glass as she shook her head and made another circuit around the room. “You claim someone from this hotel came to Beaulieu and took my jewelry.” Her words exploded, firecrackers in the quiet suite.

Winter nodded miserably and cast a long look at me, but I couldn’t rescue him. My stomach lurched anyway. “Yes, a courier.”

She slammed the rest of her drink, then handed off the glass to me. I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to do with the empty, so I set it on the coffee table while she slapped her hands to her hips. “Sugar, I don’t have dedicated staff for that sort of thing. Something this valuable, I would’ve come myself—” She slapped her chest and the impact was so loud Winter flinched. “—or sent my son, Darcy. There are a couple of men I would trust—” She gestured in my direction. “—but certainly not someone without a visible gun. Were you born last night?”

Winter cocked his head and his eyebrows furrowed. “Do you carry a gun, Madam Winters?”

“No,” she snapped and pointed at me. “But he does, and anyone else who would’ve come with me would’ve been armed to the teeth. This is New Gothenburg!”

His expression crumpled. “I deliver jewelry and go to the bank without armed men all the time. It didn’t seem strange to me.”

Her eyes widened, and I wasn't sure if she was on the verge of lecturing him like a kid or ordering me to put a bullet in his head.

“Prove you're not lying. This sounds like bullshit. I don't believe you.” My gut twisted at the words as I spoke them out loud. The problem was that Winter was very sincere and I *wanted* to believe him. I touched my scarred throat. I'd learned my lesson: a pretty face didn't always mean someone had a good heart.

Madam Winters nodded, but I half wished she didn't agree with me. “Yes.”

Winter sat there, mouth hanging open for a second, before he snapped his fingers and grinned. “I have a security system at the shop.”

Madam Winters smiled, and even if she wouldn't admit it in a thousand years, I thought she was relieved. Before tonight I'd been under the impression that she liked Winter. She waved her hand. “Fine. Until this rotten mess is sorted out, I need a replacement. I still have an important client and an event to attend tomorrow evening. The two weeks before Christmas are very busy for me.”

“A replacement of the same value?” Winter folded forward until his face was nearly between his knees and cupped his cheeks. He stared at the floor as if it held all the answers.

“I still have events!” She leaned toward him, her hair cascading, a golden curtain on either side of her face. She waited until he looked at her, then straightened. “It's only reasonable.”

He gasped and sat back like he was emerging from a pool, then blinked at her as his lips trembled upward in a smile. “I can get you something nice, but I'm sorry, those pieces were one of a kind. There are no extras laying around anywhere.”

She nodded and I didn't like the way her mouth firmed into a hard line. “And you can find it or redo it. Meantime, I will take the substitute. And when the original is in my

possession, I keep the replacement as a fee for my troubles. Sugar, it's only fair."

Winter closed his eyes and after a few long seconds he nodded. "It'll be a hit to my personal finances, but I had a good season. I can do that if it means you'll still trust me to work with me." He opened his eyes and gave her a real smile.

I cleared my throat, and they both glanced in my direction with raised eyebrows. "Madam Winters, if he's telling the truth, this bullshit isn't his fault. Maybe if that's the case, you just keep the jewelry you paid for and punish the real culprits? I would be happy to help." I opened my suit jacket to remind her that I was, in fact, armed.

Winter gasped.

Madam Winters gave me one of her genuine smiles, full of honey, and Winter looked like he was ready to faint again.

She nodded. "Do you know, sugar, sometimes I make rash decisions when I'm angry," she said in a stage-whisper as she paced a step closer to Winter.

Winter cupped his hands under his chin. "I promise, I did make the pieces. And I did send them. And I swear I can prove it! I even made a ring to go with the collection and was going to ask if you wanted it."

Her smile widened. "A ring? That would be perfect!"

"Right?" He let out a nervous little laugh.

I cleared my throat, and she nodded at me.

"Fine. If you can locate the people responsible, I won't keep the replacement, and they'll be in a world of hurt, courtesy of RJ." She gestured at me, her blood-red nails flashing in the low light. "Otherwise, I demand compensation. I'm not losing out here," she said, and her tone was so cold it could freeze an entire room.

Winter leaped to his feet. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. You will have something to complement your outfit. Is the dress still green?"

"Scarlet," she said quietly.

He nodded and his entire body seemed to vibrate on the spot.

Madam Winters turned her attention to me, then the little lady stormed in my direction. I had a lot of respect for her and also hated her a bit. From the pieces of her life I'd learned about, I knew none of it was easy, but there was a difference between fairness and the eye-for-an-eye justice she demanded, and the madam could be brutal.

"RJ," she said, quiet enough that I doubted Winter could hear her. "I trust you to sort this out, since it was your idea to make it more complicated than it needed to be. If he's lying, shoot him." She gave me a sweet smile. "Go ahead. Y'all be careful," she said, spinning away from me.

Winter frowned at her, so maybe she hadn't been quiet enough. I walked over and snagged his elbow, then led him out of the room with my heart pounding hard enough that I could feel it thudding in my ears. He stared up at me, and I knew, deep inside, I didn't want to hurt him. I just prayed that for once I would be proven wrong and he was as innocent as his wide, scared eyes tried to convince me he was.

3

WINTER



“HEY, THAT HURTS,” I SNAPPED AND TRIED TO TUG MY ARM free of RJ the giant’s iron grip. He hadn’t let go of me during the trip to the front doors of the Courtesan Hotel. Cold wind slapped my cheeks as we walked, and I shivered. His mouth twitched downward and he still didn’t let go, but his grip softened.

RJ hustled me past a younger guy in a thick black coat who was quick to flash a smile at us and seemed to be on valet duty. We nearly jogged toward a black BMW Roadster in the rear of the parking lot, which had my estimation of RJ going up a few notches. The car was sexy, no two ways about it, and I had a thing for black. The color was so clean and perfect, and along with its opposite, white, was made for showing off other colors and creations.

He took me to his Roadster and opened the door. There were only two seats, so it didn’t seem like RJ had a lot of friends he was interested in ferrying around. I sat when he gave my shoulder a push, and then he slammed the door behind me. I glared at him through the windshield as he strolled around to his side with his shoulders back and his hands in his pockets, and he didn’t so much as glance at me when he got behind the wheel and turned on the car.

“That was rude. I could’ve walked myself.”

“You ran once,” he said.

I cringed. “Yes, but then we talked to Madam Winters.”

He gave me a glare full of contempt that I felt all the way in my balls as they tried to hide against my body. “I’m not stupid. If a man shows me what type of person he is, I believe him.” He emphasized his point by smacking his palm against the steering wheel.

“I promise, I won’t run from you.”

He snorted and backed the Roadster out of the parking spot, then drove slowly toward the exit.

Anger had my body heating all over. “You don’t believe me, do you? I said *I promise*.”

“Nope,” he said blandly.

Huffing, I crossed my arms, my coat rustling a bit. The smell of the new car mixed with leather and the woodsy cologne RJ wore, which in turn had me thinking about all the things I’d missed out on while I was building my business—most of them revolved around a bed and having a man in it. I closed my eyes as my body warmed all over, then realized maybe the heated seats had something to do with that sensation.

“What did the courier look like?” RJ asked. I snapped my eyes open to study him. He seemed far too serious as he eased the Roadster onto the street. We passed a bakery and the thought of cupcakes had my stomach growling loudly enough to be heard over the road noise. He frowned in my direction.

“I never got to eat dinner. Sorry.”

He shook his head. “Give me directions to your jewelry shop.”

I did as he asked, all while trying not to be resentful. What kind of person outright dismissed someone else and thought they were lying? I hadn’t ever done anything to make him think I was a bad person. I mulled over the situation for a few minutes while he navigated the Roadster through the downtown traffic.

“What did the courier look like?” he repeated.

I spun toward him in my seat. “A cute little thing who was hurt by someone at some point.”

He frowned and cut a quick glance at me before he fixed his attention back on the road. “What does *that* mean? Do you want to get out of this or not? Don’t play games.”

“I’m not! None of this was my fault!”

He shook his head and glared at me for a second. “First of all, it was, because you were dumb enough to trust someone you didn’t know with jewelry worth a shit ton of cash.”

“Ouch,” I muttered, shifting uncomfortably.

He grunted. “For the last time, what did he look like?”

Leaning back against the leather seat, I strained my brain. What *did* he look like? I’d been tired and just finished my work. Hell, I was still exhausted. I laid a hand over my eyes and focused. “He had a crooked nose and brown hair and a nice smile. His name was Pinky.”

“And?” he asked.

I dropped my hand to stare at him. Okay, I got that he thought I was about as smart as a piece of sidewalk chewing gum, but did he have to sound so pissed off about it? “I don’t know. And he seemed nervous?”

RJ shrugged and the lights from the dash highlighted the gray in his stubble as he shifted. “Of course he did. He was ripping you off. Hopefully the security footage is helpful. Sometimes it’s grainy or catches bad angles.”

“Okay.” My stomach flopped and made me queasy. This was going to be an awful night and I wished I hadn’t gulped down wine earlier.

“What’s wrong?” he snapped.

I flinched, side-eyeing him. I shook my head because I couldn’t imagine him caring that there was anything off with me.

His face transformed into a perfect mask. I couldn’t tell if he was angry or not.

“I was waiting for food when you dragged me out of the Zin! And oh my God!” I slapped a hand to my forehead as my heart began to race. “Van! I totally forgot about him. He must be worried sick!”

“Who?” RJ asked.

“A man I work with was there at the Zin with me, and I left him without a word. Well, not on purpose.” I took my phone out of my pocket.

Winter: Are you all right? One of Madam Winters's men grabbed me at the bar because there was a terrible mistake. What's going on with you? I'm on my way back to the shop.

“What are you doing?” RJ asked, irritation heavy in his tone.

I hit Send. “Letting Van know I'm on my way to Beaulieu.”

He sighed, long, loud, and annoying. The look he gave me had my toes curling in my boots and I wasn't sure if I liked it or not. “You didn't just fucking send that message, did you?”

I glanced at my phone, but the message had gone through already. “Yes, why?” I asked.

The jerk rolled his eyes. “Do you have a bunch of texts from him asking what happened to you? *Where are you? Why did you go?* Begging you to call him? I certainly would be upset if the gorgeous man I was out on the town with vanished. I wouldn't rest until I found him.” His fingers squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles were white.

My heart fluttered at the compliment, then dropped to my toes as what he was implying sank into my obviously muddled brain. “No. . . that's weird. You ask a lot of questions. You're like a cop,” I grumbled and frowned at my phone. I brought up my messages to Van and the last one from him was telling me that he was running a bit late this morning.

He grunted. “I used to be one.”

“Really?” I tucked my phone into the inner pocket of my leather coat. “How did you go from a policeman to whatever it is you do for Madam Winters?”

He grinned, giving me a cocky eyebrow waggle. “Cause when I find the guy who did this?” He tipped his chin back just enough to let me see the scar there better while keeping his gaze fixed on the road. “I’m killing him. The law frowns on that type of justice. They would call me a vigilante and toss me in a prison cell, but I figure I deserve to get some of my own.”

I sat up straighter in my seat. “I mean, that seems reasonable.”

“Reasonable and legal are two different things, sunshine. Your boyfriend text you back?”

“He isn’t my boyfriend.” I checked my phone again and my stomach continued to churn. “He’s more like a hopeful coworker, but no.” Some time passed as we neared the place I rented. The high-rise was coming up on our left. I gripped my seat belt. “I fucked up, didn’t I?”

“Definitely,” he said, without missing a beat, and I grimaced when he chuckled.

“He didn’t really like me, did he? You’re right. I would be out of my mind with worry if the man I cared about was missing, or hell, even just a friend. What kind of person doesn’t care when the man they went out with disappears?” I ran my hands through my hair. The certainty that I was a dumbass weighed heavier than a rock on my chest.

RJ didn’t say a word as he found a parking spot near the front door along the curb. I fumbled with my seat belt and got out as quickly as possible. I couldn’t stand the thought of RJ coming around to hold the door for me right now. As we approached the front of the brick high-rise I moaned and glanced upward. All the lights on each floor were lit, even on the levels that weren’t in use.

“What is going on?” I rushed toward the front door, but RJ raced ahead of me and put out a hand. He was a massive wall

of muscle between me and the entrance. I gulped when he took the gun out of the holster under his suit jacket.

“You will stay behind me.” He tapped my chin to make me look up at his stern expression. “You will listen to me. And if you don’t think you can do that, you will stay in my car.” He pointed back to the Roadster.

“I’ve gotta see what’s happening. Those lights shouldn’t be on!”

He nodded, and I huffed, rushing to the lobby door, which easily opened. I closed my eyes. “I locked this before I left.”

“Get behind me,” he said, tone soft as he pushed in front of me and opened the door. He went in first, and I glanced around while keeping up.

“I know I locked the front door. I always do.”

He grunted and pointed at a corner of the clean but mostly bare room. I gasped because the security camera had been ripped from the wall and hung there by a cord. RJ headed toward the old freight elevator, which was the only thing of interest in the lobby.

“It’s locked,” I said, taking out my key, but when he reached the control panel, he pushed the call button and the doors creaked open, painfully slow as usual. I’d asked the mayor, Vane Elwood, who owned the building, to replace the elevator with something that wasn’t installed sometime in the sixties more than once, but he just kept telling me it was “on the list,” whatever that meant. I stared as my entire body felt like it liquified and drained out into the center of the earth. “What the fuck?”

RJ turned to study me with a frown. “At least with the camera down, they won’t know we’re here, either.”

“They who?” I asked faintly.

He shook his head, and I felt even dumber than I already had. He knew something I didn’t. When we got inside the elevator, I punched the number for Beaulieu and the car went up a couple of levels, then made a horrible clunking sound and

stopped. I whined and gripped RJ's arm embarrassingly tight as the floor tilted to the left and stayed there.

I groaned.

He glared at me.

"The building is a rental. Don't look at me that way." I stuck out my tongue at him.

"Has it done this before?" he asked, gesturing around.

"No," I grumbled. "Usually it just sounds near death."

He nodded and glanced upward toward the repair panel in the corner of the ceiling, and I was already shaking my head as he reached up, since he was so tall, and easily pushed the small door open. The metal *clanked* onto the other side as it fell. The elevator shaft was an inky void beyond.

"Nope." I said, backing away toward a corner, but an awful crackling sound echoed out in the shaft, and RJ's eyes widened. There was a strange whistling *whoosh*.

"Come here." RJ tried out a smile on me, but I was too close to a panic attack to be able to do the same in return. "Haven't you ever heard of elevator surfing? You're going to get on top. This building is old, so there should be a manual release to let me open the door above us. Simple." He stowed his gun back in the holster under his suit jacket.

"Assuming you can reach it!" I shook my head harder because the last thing in the world I wanted to do was move.

"I'm pretty tall. We'll reach it. Come on. We're not waiting." He gestured with a small wave, obviously wanting me to come closer.

"What do you think you're going to do?" I scrabbled at the rusty metal walls on either side of me but couldn't find a good handhold.

"Hoist you up, then pull myself up." He shrugged.

After a long minute of him glaring, I gingerly walked over. "I'm not an athlete."

He cupped his hands and ducked down. “Just put your foot here and I’ll get you up there.” He gazed upward.

Sighing, I rolled my neck and nodded, doing as he asked. I felt like I was flying as he lifted me, and my entire body flushed warm when my crotch brushed against his face, but then I was contending with grabbing the metal sides of the elevator roof and dragging my body upward. It wasn’t as easy as he’d made it sound. I was sweating by the time I sat on my ass on the ledge with my feet dangling.

“Move over. Watch out for the metal rope in the center. You don’t want to touch it.”

“You say this like you’ve been in an elevator shaft before,” I grumped, my voice echoing strangely. I glanced up into the darkness and it was the most amazing and horrible thing I’d ever seen.

He chuckled. “I’ve done a lot of things in my life.”

I pulled my feet up to get out of his way and turned on my phone light, then immediately searched for the elevator door as I stood. Thankfully we weren’t too far away from the next level, and I could almost reach the bottom of the door, so he definitely would be able to make it. I turned and held in a gasp as my heart started to patter at a million miles per hour. The metal rope that held the elevator car had clearly been cut, almost in half, and as I stared that strange noise happened again and a few more wires snapped and unfurled, leaving a frayed horror show in front of me.

There was grunting and rocking as RJ hoisted himself up onto the roof, and I squeaked, not able to get out real words as another wire snapped and the elevator shifted to the right. RJ huffed as he got to his feet next to me, then bent to flip the trap door in place so we had a solid floor under us. When he straightened and grunted like he’d been punched, I knew he’d spotted our predicament.

“RJ,” I whispered with a harsh exhale of breath.

“Elevators have emergency brakes,” he said at once. He dragged me into his arms like he would be able to keep me

safe if the whole thing plunged to our doom.

“Ones this old? Built in the sixties and barely maintained?”

He shrugged and I felt it since he had me cradled so close. “You always take the elevator when you come and go?”

I nodded numbly.

“Yeah, let’s get the fuck out of here.” He turned and began to mess around with a red lever to the right of the elevator door above us, which I hadn’t had a hope of reaching. He grunted, and I gasped when he snapped the red metal bar off and jammed it between the elevator doors. Sweat ran down his cheeks as he strained and the metal lever began to bend, but the elevator doors cracked open, thank God, letting in some light. I shoved my phone back in my pocket and couldn’t stop staring at the metal rope suspending the car because another piece of wire unraveled. The elevator jolted to the left. RJ grabbed me and kept me from sliding away.

“Doesn’t feel like those brakes engaged, does it?” I asked, with a horrible little laugh I couldn’t hold in.

“Come here,” he said, and when I glanced up, I nearly cried to see the doors open enough for me to fit through; it would be a squeeze for him, though. He lifted me as if I weighed nothing, and I scabbled in a panic to grab on to the doors. He shoved my ass, and I scraped my belly but ended up mostly out of the elevator shaft. I got my right foot on the floor and launched myself through into the room on the other side, tears streaming down my face.

I sat up and turned around in time to see RJ’s hands on the floor, and he pulled himself up in a painfully slow process. There was a terrible *thwanging* noise and an awful screeching, and I crawled forward to grab RJ’s arms. I braced my feet on either side of the open doors and tugged with all my strength, and between the two of us, we hauled him onto the floor out of the shaft. There was a loud *thud* and crash that sounded like a car wreck. The floor shook. He wasn’t quite so cocky when he was lying beside me on the dirty tiles. Insatiable curiosity sank its claws into me, and I crawled back over with my phone out and stared down the shaft, taking in the disaster at the bottom.

“Someone tried to kill me!” I glanced wildly back at him.

He nodded. “Yep.”

I started to laugh, and he shushed me, taking his gun out of the holster as he lay there catching his breath. He tapped the weapon against his chest.

“I’m never getting into another elevator in my whole entire life,” I muttered.

He sat up and tugged me away from the ledge. “You’re all right,” he grumbled, but it sounded more like a threat, and the awful expression on his face had me cringing. He shushed me and stood. I stared at his hand as he offered it to me. In the end, I let him help me to my feet. It took me a second to be steady and get my knees to agree to supporting me.

“Where are the stairs?” he asked, voice a low rumble in the empty room.

“This way,” I said, going straight ahead. The lights were on in the entire floor, which was a mirror image of all the other ones in the building, and I took him to the stairwell at the back that gave access to all the levels. On the way up to my shop I noted that each door we passed was open. “I always keep them closed and locked,” I said, pointing at one wide-open door.

RJ nodded. “Keep your voice down,” he whispered.

Every hair on my body stood on end. Did he think someone was still here who might hurt us?

The second we entered the back of the shop I let out a sob because I couldn’t help it.

The first thing I noticed was the stone tile that hid the safe was thrown to the side and the door for the minivault was open. I stumbled over and stared down into the empty hole and my eyes burned with the need to shed tears. I went to the cabinet set into the wall where I stored completed pieces—it was more like a gun safe with a heavy-duty lock on the front—but it was open, too.

All the drawers were empty.

I ran to my worktable and ducked down, but the boxes I stored underneath that held raw materials were missing. I'd never been as careful with the unworked gems as I should be, and I'd had a couple go missing over the years, but —“Everything is gone!”

I ran out front, not sure why I still had any hope, but all the displays were naked. I shook my head and hugged my arms around my body. “It’s all gone. I don’t have anything.” The words came out as a sob. “Oh God, I don’t have anything. What will I tell Madam Winters?” My heart lurched. “My money is gone. Even my fucking tools are gone.” I hung my head.

“What about insurance?” RJ asked as he came out with his gun still in hand.

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. “That might be enough to let me get some supplies and start over, but I’ll have to file a police report and go through an entire process. It could take months if not longer. I’ll have to rebuild my stock from scratch. In the meantime, my business will be at a standstill.” My stomach rebelled and I raced for the bathroom off my workroom and spent a few minutes on my knees bartering with God as my gut threatened to send everything up.

A gentle hand on my neck had me glancing back at RJ. I couldn’t help it. The tears escaped. “My sister is getting an engineering degree. I pay for it. My parents are a fucking mess. They borrow at least a hundred grand from me every year—each, mind you—and have since my business started making money. I support all of them.”

He shrugged. “So, they learn to manage their money and leave you out of it.”

Frantic, I shook my head. “You don’t understand. Dad’s an addict. He hasn’t held a job since I was ten. Mom’s okay, but she’s always moving to a new state where *things will be better* and starting over. She’s only got five left before she’s gotta admit she’s the problem.”

He brushed my hair back off my forehead, and I stilled as his rough, warm fingertips grazed my skin. “What do you get

out of all this? I mean, I understand helping your sister, if your parents are that untrustworthy, but what good to you is the rest of it?”

I stared around the tiny bathroom and grimaced. Someone had even removed the painting of Queen Elizabeth’s crown that I’d had on the wall. “Peace of mind, I suppose.”

“You get used.”

I scowled at him. “You don’t know me. Don’t judge me.”

He sat back on his haunches and rested his gun across his knee. A range of emotions flashed across his face, but he ended with boredom. “Where do you keep the security footage?”

It took my brain cells a few seconds to be useful, but then I straightened. “It’s backed up on the cloud.” I tugged my phone out of my pocket. “Come on. Let’s go see if they stole all my stools.”

It turned out everything that wasn’t nailed down, and a few things that were, had been removed, so we sat on the floor with our backs pressed against the wall in my workroom, and he sifted through the footage from tonight with me. It was frustrating.

“Where’s the courier?” I grumbled. “Oh, that’s Alton Bouchard,” I said, pointing at my phone screen as we watched a man in a suit walk onto the elevator from the back. “The courier should be coming.” The feed cut, and I knocked my head against the wall as a fresh round of tears threatened to drown me. “The cameras weren’t working earlier. I forgot.”

RJ put his arm around my shoulders, and I slumped against his solid side. “You got hit, plain and simple. This was a tight job. At least two people were in on it, the man who works with you and the courier. I would guess they had maybe five guys total to clean this place out so quickly, but two organized ones could do it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I have nothing to give Madam Winters. I don’t even have her money to refund. I was waiting to make one big cash drop at the end of the month. The only

money in my account right now is for the utilities and rent that takes care of this building. I probably have an extra couple of hundred bucks in there, but not more than that.” Tears burned their way down my face. “Van and I decided it would be easier to wait.”

He drew me a little closer, and I leaned my head on his chest. “Van and you? Or you let this person talk you into waiting?”

I shrugged because I honestly wasn’t certain of anything anymore.

“He didn’t text you back?”

“No,” I mumbled and wiped at my face. “You think he had a hand in this?”

“Do fish swim in the sea?” he asked, voice mean, and I flinched. He rubbed my shoulder.

“Damn it.”

He shook me, and I snapped my attention to his face. “You have to do something. I can tell Natalia Winters that I won’t shoot you, but someone else will.”

I clutched at his suit jacket while my mind spun.

“Think,” he growled. “For some reason, I don’t want you dead. Fix it.”

“Alton! I’ve sold a lot of expensive pieces to him. If I beg, he might let me borrow something.” Hope, which I’d thought was long gone, burned bright in my chest again.

“That’s the best you can do? You don’t have a workshop at home?” he asked, giving me another shake.

Laughing, I buried my face against his shoulder. “I live one floor down. I don’t take anything home with me because I’m always here, and I’ve never even bothered doing anything more than put in a bed and rod for my clothes. This shop is my whole life.”

RJ stared down at my face, lips pursed, and the way he was scrutinizing me had my stomach going pleasantly warm.

“Here’s what we’ll do. We go talk to Alton because we’re on a clock with the madam. I know him because he used to come into the Courtesan a lot. Then we get you fed. Then I’ll go find this Van guy. Show me what he looks like.”

I took out my phone and went back through the footage. I stopped on a good still of Van’s face. When I lifted the phone so RJ could see the image, he began to laugh, and it didn’t sound nice at all.

“What?” I asked.

He shrugged. “No matter what happens, I’m going to make sure we catch that motherfucker.”

“Why?” I murmured.

He stared at me and his jaw ticked. He shook his head and stood up. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.” He stormed toward the rear stairwell, and I followed. I was out on the metal steps when I realized someone had even taken the curtain that I’d had hanging over the door to keep out the cold, and somehow that seemed like the worst insult of all.

4

RJ



WINTER STUMBLED, SO I WRAPPED MY ARM AROUND HIM AS we walked through a light dusting of snow to the front door of Alton Bouchard’s obnoxious mansion on Vert Island. The joint could’ve been transported here from France, with its off-white stone walls and all the pillars. I was fairly sure the hedges to the left of the house were a labyrinth. It was a lot to take in.

The crisp scent of Winter, both the man and the season, were in my nose, and I wanted to bury my face against his hair and inhale—but I didn’t. When we reached the massive, pale double doors, I beat on the right one with the heel of my palm. It was late, past one o’clock in the morning, and while I didn’t think Alton was some teetotaler tucked up in bed at 8:00 p.m. on the dot each evening, it wouldn’t be ridiculous for him to be asleep.

“Oh, I hope this works,” Winter said, bouncing on his heels, and then he blasted me with a trusting smile.

My heart twisted and I couldn’t look away from the sweet expression on his face. Was he playing me? Would he shove a knife in my back later? I didn’t want to believe anything bad about Winter because he seemed so innocent, but a good grifter could make a man believe his own mother was the devil, and I didn’t want to get caught up in some fantasy persona that didn’t exist. But Winter continued to smile, and I gave him a squeeze because fuck me, he was adorable.

“You’ll be fine,” I muttered, even though I shouldn’t have said anything so unrealistic. He was naïve, though, as if maybe he didn’t go out into the world much, and every one of my protective instincts was fired up where he was concerned. I hated to think this way, but I would do everything I could to keep him alive and kicking, even if it meant I had to take him away from New Gothenburg and give up on my revenge.

And the end was so close now. I tried not to think of the rage and joy that had entwined in my chest when I’d seen the face of the asshole on the security footage.

Winter shifted against me and cleared his throat.

No one answered the door. I backed up a couple of steps and stared at the over-the-top house, mentally willing Alton not to be a fuckhead. I’d seen him be a real dick a time or two when he was still frequenting the Courtesan, and the man wasn’t known for a pleasant mood. I beat my fist against the door.

“Not that I mind, but why are you holding me?” Winter asked, voice a touch higher than usual. When I glanced at him, his cheeks were pink, but I couldn’t tell if it was because of the cold or something else.

“If anyone opens fire, they’re more likely to hit me than you this way,” I said, keeping my tone even. I gave him a squeeze.

He glanced at me and frowned, and when I winked at him, he grinned and shook his head. “Mr. Bouchard knows me. I doubt he would have snipers take me down.”

“You’ve never seen a Texan get his sleep interrupted,” I murmured.

The door opened and a chubby man, with his dark hair pulled back in a bun and sporting plaid PJs, flashed me a nervous smile. “I’m sorry, but the Bouchards are not available. Please come back tomorrow.” Before I could open my mouth to say two words, the door closed and the sound of the lock engaging rang through the quiet night.

“I’m finished,” Winter mumbled. He covered his eyes with his hands. “Stick a fork in me because I’m done.”

Fury washed through me, and I beat my fist on the door, this time reliving some of my days on the force. I pounded hard enough to wake the dead.

In almost no time at all the door opened again and the man on the other side appeared ready to explode with a red face and wide eyes. “Please stop making so much racket! The Bouchards are in bed. It’s not worth it for me to go bother them. Please go away!” He pouted in my direction.

“This is an emergency,” I ground out.

“What’s going on?” The man’s expression softened a bit.

“We’ll tell Mr. Bouchard the details, and he’ll agree it’s important. Just go get him,” Winter said with his best smile. “Please?”

The door snapped shut again and the large pine wreath hanging in the center swayed and sent the smell of Christmas wafting around us. I wanted to growl because the least the guy could’ve done was invite Winter in out of the cold. I wrapped both arms around him to keep him warm, and he smiled up at me.

“I know you think Van did this, but what if he’s a victim like me? What if he’s in trouble somewhere and that’s why he isn’t answering my texts? He’s been nice.” Winter slipped his thumbnail into his mouth and nibbled on it while he stared at the closed door. “What if he’s hurt?”

“He’s not, but he will be,” I said.

“How do you know?” Winter asked, and now he sounded irritated.

I gritted my teeth. “I just know. It’s a gut instinct. Cops get those.”

“But you aren’t a cop!” He pointed at me with an accusing little finger wiggle. “You’re a bad guy now.”

“I was always a bad guy,” I grumbled, tickling my fingers against his cheek. “Nothing new.”

The door opened again and a man I didn't know, but who seemed vaguely familiar, stood there. He was young and handsome enough I figured he must be the husband that had gotten Alton Bouchard to stop spending his cash on the good-time boys at the Courtesan. The silky red robe he wore clung to his lightly muscled body in some very suggestive ways that had Winter clearing his throat and staring at his toes. The man brushed back his dark hair and gave us both a confused but friendly smile.

"I'm sorry about that. Alton and I asked not to be bothered tonight. Please come in." He stood aside and gestured us forward. We stopped to kick off our boots so we wouldn't drag snow and mud everywhere. Winter's eyes were huge as he took in the pretentious foyer. The ceiling was so far away we could probably play an easygoing game of baseball without hitting it. A split staircase curved up to the second floor, and that would've maybe been normal enough, but the handrails were dark wood that probably had taken twenty trees to make. Whoever had decorated had a palace in mind. Behind the staircase, the rest of the first floor spread out. Arched doorways let us catch glimpses of other rooms, and fancy paintings hung on the royal blue walls.

"Wow," Winter whispered.

The man in the robe cleared his throat, then grinned when Winter met his gaze. "I apologize, but Alton is handling an emergency in his office. He said he knows Mr. Janvier and asked me to talk to him until he can get downstairs."

"How did Mr. Bouchard know I was here?" Winter blinked at him in confusion. "The gates at the end of the drive were open and no one was in the tiny building near them."

The man laughed. "There is a security system in the house and Alton checked." He shrugged and seemed embarrassed, but after everything I'd seen tonight, I wouldn't blame anyone who had an entire fortress surrounding their home. It was only blind luck that Winter wasn't a mangled corpse at the bottom of an elevator shaft.

“Yeah, I’m not confused on how that works,” I said, but Winter still seemed surprised.

“Are you Noah?” Winter gushed and cupped his cheeks. “Are you the one wearing all my designs?” He stared Noah up and down, even though he’d been too embarrassed to look only a minute ago. “I have so many new ideas now that I’ve seen you. Have you ever considered a nose piercing? It would be stunning on you. A small twinkle right here.” Winter touched his own face.

Noah gestured at us to follow him deeper into the house. “Excuse me?” he said with a polite smile. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Oh!” Winter smacked my arm in excitement and grinned. “Mr. Bouchard has bought an unholy amount of jewelry from my shop. I own Beaulieu and complete all the designs. Well, I have a couple of pieces I sent out for mass production, but most of it is done by me.”

Noah beamed at Winter as he led us along a hallway, then into a kitchen as gargantuan as the rest of the house, where he tugged out a stool at a black stone island before gesturing at us to sit. His silky robe flashed in the light. I noticed a string of rubies embedded in a silver chain around his neck that dipped below the fabric.

“You’re a true artist. I love each and every piece.” Noah tugged out the necklace so it was on display. “I can tell the jewelry Alton buys is handmade and not factory produced. I can feel the love in it. The chains are sturdier. I’m a painter, and I sense that another artist made these items with his hands.”

Winter went up on tiptoe in excitement before he scrambled onto the stool and almost tipped it. I put both my hands on his shoulders to keep him from falling off backward.

“Have a seat, sir,” Noah said to me. “I can make coffee. . . .” He didn’t sound too sure about that, though, as he pattered around the kitchen, and in the end, he found a huge mason jar labeled *Hot Cocoa* on the counter and began heating milk for that instead. He consulted the written instructions taped to the

front every step of the way, so I assumed he didn't do things for himself often.

As Noah moved around near the stove, the collar of his robe slipped down, revealing a matching red lacy garment. Winter's eyes grew so wide I thought they might fall out of his head and roll away, but Noah was quick to adjust his collar and didn't even seem to have noticed he'd given us a peek at what he was wearing underneath—or perhaps he simply didn't care.

“What is this about?” Noah asked, glancing between us.

“Uh,” Winter said, along with a high-pitched laugh. “We're sorry to bother you so late, and this will sound odd, but I'm hoping you'll help me.” His voice wavered.

Noah turned around at his spot near the stove and crossed his arms while a small frown snuck across his face. “If I can help, sure. What is wrong?”

I snorted and shook my head. “I can hardly believe someone as sweet as you puts up with the Alton Bouchard I know.”

There was a deep laugh from behind me, and I turned in time to see Alton swagger his way into the kitchen in a pair of black pajama pants and nothing else. He had some of the reddest hair I'd ever seen, and the smattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks should've made him *cute*, but with his hard jaw that word didn't quite fit. Alton was nearly as tall as me, too, and he had enough muscle that I would take some precautions with him if we were in a fight situation.

Winter swiveled his attention back to Noah, cheeks bright again.

“You're correct in that estimation, sir. I'm a lucky son of a bitch to have him. My husband is priceless.” Alton smacked my arm in a light, friendly way, so I didn't think I'd pissed him off.

“Don't say that. I like your mother,” Noah said with an eye roll, and Alton barked out a laugh. His red hair was messy, and sure, he might've been taking care of a business emergency,

but I would bet a thousand bucks he'd also been fucking his husband before we got here. A man didn't look that relaxed and ruffled unless he'd been in bed with a lover.

Winter stumbled off his stool and I half expected him to drop to his knees, but he only cupped his hands in front of himself, and I didn't think he realized that he was already begging with his entire body. "I'm in some serious trouble, Mr. Bouchard. I need to borrow some of the jewelry I made for you, if possible. Maybe one of the ruby pieces? Or diamonds, but it would need to be something elaborate." Winter went on to explain some of the details of the theft, which wasn't much because we didn't exactly have a lot to go on yet, and then went into the sad tale of his broken commitment to Madam Winters and the general cash lurch he'd been left in.

Alton's face turned into a mask of horror as Winter was wrapping up an abbreviated version of his visit to the Courtesan tonight, but Noah simply seemed confused, even though he paid attention to every word exchanged.

"*Je-sus* Christ Almighty, yeah, you can borrow whatever you need, so long as Noah agrees." Alton cut a questioning glance at his husband.

Noah shrugged. "It isn't like I don't have a huge collection." The warm smile he gave to Alton had me looking away because it was almost too intimate. I would've had an easier time watching them if they were fucking each other, but the love in Noah's eyes made me uncomfortable. "If you're sure it will help, I'm happy to accommodate. I mean. . . I do know not everything that goes on at the Courtesan is legal, so it might be dangerous to upset that woman."

Alton nodded. "I wouldn't put anyone on her bad side on purpose. It's about as smart as trying to put a dress on a horse."

Noah walked over to Winter and gave him a light hug. "You seem like you've had a long night. Come with me. You can pick out anything. The only jewelry I won't part with is right here." He flashed his wedding ring and grinned.

“You do know I can’t guarantee your jewelry will come back in the same condition you loaned it? I’ll do my best and replace it later if I need to.” Winter gnawed on the corner of his mouth. “I hope I’ll have the materials on hand soon to do that, anyway. It might take a while.”

Noah shrugged. “It is okay. Come on.”

I was uncomfortable watching them go off together and I almost followed, but then I noticed steam rising from the pan on the stove, which Noah seemed to have forgotten. I poured the milk into the four mugs Noah had already set out.

Alton snorted and came over to lean against the counter next to me, handing me a spoon from a drawer. I scooped out the cocoa mix and stirred it into the mugs.

“I thought you were just a hired gun here to make sure Winter tried his hardest to beg right, but you stared at that ass while it was walking away.” Alton smirked like an asshole, but he was handsome, and I’d seen him get away with acting however he wanted time and again.

I scowled at him. “So? It’s a nice one. Who wouldn’t look?”

Alton chuckled, then snagged one of the mugs and began to sip the cocoa. “It is, but I have a nicer one, and it’s all wrapped up in silk.” He adjusted himself without any shame at all, and I had to laugh.

About twenty minutes later, Alton and I were sitting on stools existing in a pleasant silence as we drank the cocoa when Winter came back into the kitchen with a large gold bag dangling from one hand. The way he held the handle—like it was delicate—made me think all the jewelry he wanted to borrow for Madam Winters was in his possession, and relief hit me like a ton of bricks. It took me a second to notice how his cheeks were so pink they were almost red.

“Thank you, Mr. Bouchard. Noah asked me to tell you that he wants you to. . . to come to the bedroom.” Winter nearly squeaked out that last word.

Alton chuckled and slapped me on the shoulder. “I have to go perform my husbandly duties. Thank you, Winter.” He winked.

Winter bit his lip and nodded quickly. It was clear he had no idea how to respond to Alton’s teasing, and for someone like him, what he’d said was fairly mild.

“Let me see you out.”

I wouldn’t say Alton rushed us through the front door, but he definitely had a bounce in his step and was quick to say his final farewells. Once we were back outside again with the snow falling, it was almost as if our late-night visit had never happened.

Winter stood on the stoop staring down at the bag he held with his bottom lip clenched between his teeth.

“What has you so flustered?” I asked, nudging his shoulder with my elbow.

He shrugged and ran his fingers through his hair. “I guess I didn’t realize how easily something like that would shock me,” he whispered, glancing with wide eyes over his shoulder at the door. “Nudity in art doesn’t bother me, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with sex,” he said in a rush as he grasped my wrist. “I think it’s good between people who love each other.”

I couldn’t help it, I snickered. “Okay, now I have to know what you saw.”

Winter startled me when he flopped against my side and rested his forehead on my shoulder. “You know how Noah’s robe slipped,” he said.

“Yeah, I noticed the fancy underwear.”

He knocked his forehead against me, hard enough that it stung. “The red lace was only the tip of the iceberg. Noah has an underwear hoard that rivals the jewelry collection. They’re all organized very nicely in boxes, but some of them were sitting around open, and then I realized that he must have about a hundred of them. Maybe more.”

I laughed and patted the top of his head, and I was surprised by the softness of his hair. “Alton has always seemed like the type to beat a man, not spoil him. I’m surprised.”

Winter shrugged, then grinned up at me, but none of the blush had left his cheeks, and if anything, it was worse. “They’re very involved with each other. That’s everything a couple should be.” He let out a wistful sigh.

“Alton has the vibe of a man who likes to be in charge. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was a Dom in their bedroom games.” I bared my teeth for a second, then laughed. It had been ages since I’d had this much fun in a conversation with a man.

Winter stared up at me. “You mean, like. . . he hurts poor Noah?”

I shrugged. “Not necessarily. More like he tells him what to do and how to do it and rewards him for listening. . . or punishes him when he doesn’t. There are all sorts of punishments for good boys that aren’t really mean.” I winked.

Winter seemed to think about what I’d said for a second, then abruptly started toward the Roadster. “How do you know those sorts of things?”

I shrugged when he glanced back.

Winter started to giggle.

“What?” I asked.

The wicked little smirk that curled the corners of his lips sent a spike of need through me and let me view a new side of him. “Maybe I should’ve walked in there and been all *hey, Daddy, I need your jewels*. Alton might’ve given them to me. Get it? Jewels?” He busted out laughing and seemed far too pleased, then stifled a huge yawn.

Hearing *Daddy* fall from Winter’s pink lips fired a sizzle of lust through me and my cock stiffened until I was uncomfortably aware of it. “Don’t call Alton Daddy.” We reached the Roadster, and I opened his door.

Winter grinned. “I wouldn’t for real,” he said as he sat. “Why?”

“Never mind,” I growled out and shut his door. The short walk around the car in the cold wasn’t enough to get my cock to behave. When I was behind the steering wheel I ignored Winter, but as I put the car in gear and started it along the snow-covered driveway, he rested his hand on my thigh. I glanced at him. It must’ve taken all his courage for him to touch me because he was biting his lip and his grip on me tightened.

“Do you. . . like to be called Daddy?”

I stopped the car and leaned over, sealing my lips on top of those sweet ones of his that had suddenly decided to be so curious. He tasted good—spicy and earthy—and his mouth trembled when I invaded with my tongue and swirled it around the tip of his.

“Oh,” he squeaked as I sat back.

I removed his hand from my thigh, kissed his knuckles, and then gently settled his hand back on his lap. “Don’t start things you aren’t ready for, boy. You have no idea what a man like me could do to you.”

My cock didn’t go back to sleep because the glint in his eyes said loud and clear that maybe he would like to find out, and holy fuck, this little piece of sunshine was a temptation.

5

WINTER



LICKING MY LIPS, I KEPT STEALING PEEKS AT RJ AS HE DROVE. His hands were huge on the steering wheel and he seemed in control of his body—in every way possible. People didn't often bring up things they weren't interested in, so he had to be a Dom, right?

Did he want someone to call him Daddy?

Maybe he did.

Or it could've just been a conversation point.

Why can't I stop thinking about this?

Could I ever call someone Daddy? I mulled that question over as RJ turned on the radio. Quiet holiday tunes filled the cab and he sighed, then changed the channel. The new music was instrumental, something I didn't know with a drowsy beat and a lot of violins.

I mouthed the word "daddy."

Hey, Daddy.

How are you doing today, Daddy? I thought maybe I liked saying that stuff in general, just as a way to acknowledge a man I was with. It was almost the same as sweetheart or honey, only there was a sensual undertone to it I loved.

Fuck me, Daddy.

I shivered. Yeah, okay, I liked it.

RJ adjusted the vents in my direction and turned the heat up a bit, and I hid my smile behind my hand. Someone I might call Daddy would pay for dinner, which I assumed RJ would do, and open doors, which I already knew he did, and take control during sex. I rubbed a hand across my abs and my excited cock jammed uncomfortably against my pants. The semi would be noticeable soon if I didn't get off this train of thought. Besides, I had more important things to worry about.

“Why are you staring at me? What are you thinking?” RJ asked.

His question shot a thrill of something scary and sweet through my system, and I leaned away from him. What the hell? He'd kissed me. That meant he was interested, right? “Nothing much, just wondering whether or not I would enjoy calling you Daddy.”

“Oh yeah? Why is that in your pretty head, sunshine?” he asked, and the question was soft, nearly friendly. I rubbed my hands against my thighs, and I didn't miss him watching me out of the corner of his eye before he focused on the road again.

“Because I might want to do it.”

His strong hands flexed on the steering wheel. “You don't know what you're talking about,” he said in a snarky tone.

I reached over and gently skittered my fingertips along the back of his hand. “Maybe you could teach me?”

RJ shook me off.

Hurt made me stuff my hands in my coat pockets.

“I don't have time for this,” he said.

I stared out the passenger window while some of the good feelings that had been chasing off my bad mood melted and disappeared. What RJ really meant was he didn't have time for me, personally, and that was all too familiar. No one ever had time for me, unless I was paying them or selling them something.

“We’ve gotta track down the men who robbed you. If we don’t move fast, these guys will be gone forever. You should talk to the cops tomorrow to get things rolling with your insurance company.” His voice fired like a cannon blast in the quiet that had settled over us.

“I can probably file without it,” I mumbled.

“Yeah, but you’ll have a tougher time.”

I shrugged. “As far as Van goes, the world doesn’t work that way. No one can vanish these days.”

“You would be surprised,” he grumbled.

I wasn’t paying attention to where RJ was taking us, but I thought we were on the southwest side of New Gothenburg. He drove through a quaint neighborhood with well-maintained older homes on huge lots. The lawns started to get bigger, and we passed two towering pine trees before he turned the Roadster in to a lane in front of a beautiful, mid-century modern home. Stone and steel appeared to be the main construction materials, and there was a liberal use of glass as a style element. The windows were much larger than usual. The structure was two stories and I loved that no part of the wings making up the house matched squarely. Each section stuck out at different angles. RJ drove the Roadster into a carport under a deck.

“Where are we?” I asked with a smile. “I’ve always loved these types of houses. I might buy one like it if I could ever lose my love of downtown.”

He turned off the car and shot me a long look. “My place. You could be in danger. Until we’re certain you’re not going to be gunned down, I’m gonna watch you. Someone tried to murder you tonight.”

I shrugged and refused to think about the close call we’d had. “That isn’t really your problem. Madam Winters didn’t tell you to do this.”

He pointed at my door. “This is what’s happening. Get out. I’m going to have someone I know take the jewelry to the

madam. I don't want you running around the city anymore tonight."

My breath caught in my throat and I snagged his arm in a tight grip. "But I already lost jewelry to a courier. What if something happens to this?"

He glared and rested his hand on mine. "No, you didn't. You were taken in a long-term scheme by a good thief. *There was no courier. Move.*"

Maybe it was the late hour or all the bullshit I'd dealt with today, but I laughed. "Yes, Daddy." I blew an obnoxious kiss at him and got out of the car.

He followed me, then strode forward and opened a door set in stone. "Go." He gestured for me to walk inside ahead of him. "The light is on a motion sensor." He already had his phone out and to his ear. As I walked past him, he snatched the bag from my hand, and I had to stop myself from fighting him to keep it.

RJ sighed. "If you want to call me Daddy, you have to keep up your end of the deal."

"What deal?" I stared at him and nibbled on my thumbnail.

He bent forward and brushed his lips to my cheek, then nudged his nose against my ear. "If I'm Daddy, that means you listen to me and stop being a shit. Get in the house."

Chuckling, I nodded and went inside, and even though it made me queasy to let him out of my sight with the jewelry, I listened. I wandered into a small room that held the furnace. There was also a mat clearly meant for muddy shoes and a rack of winter clothes near the door. Some ski equipment was stacked in one corner. I hadn't imagined RJ with a home that was so obviously a space where he lived and it made me smile.

I took off my leather coat and hung it up, then fished my phone out of the inner pocket and stuck it in my back one. I shivered and wandered through a door and farther inside. I was in some sort of family room, with low tan leather couches, a TV in one corner, and a fireplace on the other side across from it. I meandered that direction. The style in the house matched

the exterior design, and I couldn't imagine how much money RJ had burned to get the vintage furniture, but everything appeared to be from the late fifties or early sixties, even the golden sunburst clock on the wall. I sighed at the time. It was getting close to three in the morning.

I'd been so happy earlier. I covered my face with my hands.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there lamenting my life choices, but eventually heavy hands landed on my shoulders and massaged until I relaxed a little.

"It's taken care of," RJ murmured, kneading his thumbs into the base of my neck. "Let's get you a quick bite and hit the hay."

Sighing, I nodded.

He led me to a staircase in the corner near the TV and we went upstairs into another entertaining room. This one seemed designed with guests in mind more than relaxing. Several green velvet couches surrounded a round wooden coffee table and beyond was a formal dining room. He took me out to the kitchen and directed me toward a two-seater booth in a breakfast nook with an oval window that looked out over the lawn into a pine forest. Above the tree line, stars were beginning to peek out. It was a breathtaking view with the snow reflecting the house lights.

"Wow."

RJ grunted and went to the stainless steel fridge, pulling open the door.

"Do you cook?" I asked around a yawn.

"You can't eat out all the time," he said, though that wasn't much of an answer.

"I do." I stuck my tongue out at him when he glared at me.

"That's terrible for you."

I crossed my arms and leaned back in the seat. "Hasn't killed me yet."

“Give it time,” he said, then pulled out some white paper deli bags. He snagged a loaf of bread from the counter as he passed it and brought everything over to me.

“You’re so dire,” I murmured.

He sighed and narrowed his eyes in my direction. “Make a sandwich. Eat.”

“I don’t have a plate or mayo or mustard.” I blinked up at him and was surprised when he tweaked my nose.

He brought the rest of my requested items. “Eat. Get some sleep. The master bedroom is on this level. I would prefer you in it.”

My stomach warmed. Was that his bedroom? “What are you doing?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Looking for *Van*.” He snorted and shook his head. “Van. That’s a good one.”

Frowning, I sat up straighter and pulled two slices of bread out of the bag, then set them on my plate. “You’re going to leave me alone after going on and on about my safety?”

“No one but me knows you’re here,” he said, rolling his eyes.

Licking my lips, I rested my hands on the table and took a deep breath, then smiled at him. “Daddy, please stay.”

RJ’s entire body jolted and he sucked in a deep breath through clenched teeth. He paced over to stand directly beside me, and I loved how he seemed ready to snap, like a bowstring that would let an arrow fly directly toward me.

“I feel like I’m abusing a superpower,” I said with a grin.

“You’re a brat.” He shook his head at me, clearly communicating his disappointment.

“No!” I was truly hurt and couldn’t say why.

“Yes.” He nodded, and I loved the tiny smile that kicked up a corner of his mouth. “But you need to eat, and I do want to check out a few things. I want to find you in bed when I get back.” His gaze was intent and he sounded so serious.

I already knew I would be literally anywhere else when he got home, and not because I didn't want to sleep on a bed, but mostly because it was fun riling him up. Fuck, maybe I was a brat. "Okay, Daddy," I said.

He bent and cupped the back of my head, and this time the kiss he laid on me was harsh and stole my breath. He parted my lips with his tongue and scouted out my mouth, then sucked on my bottom lip and growled. My cock was throbbing and all I could think about was getting it out of my pants and jerking off by the time he was finished.

He glanced down at my lap. "You don't want to know what will happen if you touch that before I get back."

Tingles raced over my skin and my belly quivered as I watched him walk away.

It took me fifteen minutes to calm down enough to finish making my sandwich, and I was smiling the entire time I did. Maybe this wasn't such a terrible day after all.

6

RJ



IT WAS AN EFFORT TO DRAG ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER as I entered my house. False dawn created a velvety blue glow in the east. I glanced around the basement entryway and sighed out in happiness as I spotted Winter's boots and leather coat. I brushed my fingers along the cool, slick sleeve, then shuffled closer to inhale the wisps of his scent on the collar. He was so fucking gorgeous I could barely stand it, and he smelled like a place I wanted to visit—exotic and homey all at the same time.

Now that Winter wasn't standing in front of me I could let myself seethe with rage about everything that had happened tonight. I hadn't found Vance Cromwell. He wasn't even good enough for a bullet. No, when I hauled him out of whatever rat hole he'd crawled into, I was going to tie him to the bumper of my car and go drag racing. I let out a long breath. The moment I'd seen his face on that security footage, I'd known what kind of lowlife scumbag I was dealing with.

And Winter didn't have a clue, but Vance was perfectly capable of vanishing.

I'd been hunting for him for ten fucking years only to have him turn up now, after I'd lost hope.

Sighing, I ran a hand over my face and kicked off my boots, then went through the next door to the TV room. I stopped still the second I was over the threshold with the door shut behind me and snorted, shaking my head.

Winter had dragged some pillows and a comforter out of one of the bedrooms, I thought maybe the one down here, and he'd made a cute nest in front of the fireplace. He'd stripped down to some very clingy black briefs and was lying on top of the bedding because he'd turned on the gas fireplace. Flames danced in the grate and made his skin glow. It was certainly toasty in here, perfect for being naked. I took off my suit jacket and tossed it on the couch. With everything going on, I didn't want my gun far away, but I stripped the holster off and set it on an end table.

Winter was adorable and he wanted to play with fire. Why not let him? Smiling, I unbuttoned my shirt and tugged it out of my pants before tossing it with my other clothing. I pulled my belt out of the loops and wrapped it around my left wrist, then went over to stare at Winter. His hair was a sexy mess. He shifted and the way he arched to get comfortable drew my attention to his pink nipples, which matched his parted lips. He seemed twice as innocent asleep as awake. He had some wood and the bulge in his underwear made him look edible and fuckable. His thighs were toned, and I would love to have them over my shoulders or spread for me so that I could get at his ass.

Giving my happy cock a squeeze, I stared for a while longer, then went down to my knees next to him. I took the belt off my wrist and wrapped it around his left one before slipping the leather through the buckle and tugging it tight. He was still asleep and didn't budge. I dragged his arm up over his head, leaning down to anchor his hand in place with my weight. His brow furrowed.

"Bad boys don't get what they want," I whispered in his ear.

He gasped and his eyes snapped open. He tried to jerk his arm down and confusion swept across his face when he couldn't. He glanced upward and his mouth fell open. With a tiny moan, he squirmed around, and the bulge in the front of his briefs swelled. I wanted to touch him there—he was such a horny mess—but I wasn't sure he was really awake yet. It wouldn't be any fun if he didn't know what was happening.

“Oh, you’re back,” he said, voice thick with sleep. His eyes went wider as he tugged on his captured arm. “RJ.”

I slung my leg over him and caged him in, leaning down to press a kiss on his forehead. “Why didn’t you listen to me and go to the bedroom?”

He shrugged, and I was happy that he didn’t seem to be upset that I had him semi restrained.

“That isn’t good enough. You know why you chose to ignore my instructions.”

He shrugged again and wouldn’t meet my eye, but a pretty blush spread across his face and down his neck.

“Were you interested in punishments that good boys get to let them know when they’ve been bad?” I jerked his arm higher, stretching out his body. His free hand drifted down toward his cock and he toyed with the waistband of his briefs, clearly testing the waters to see what he could get away with before I would say something. I slid my hand down his chest, tickling through the sparse hair there, and laid it over his.

He shrugged once more.

Maybe he didn’t really know what he was doing or wanted. “You had a weird night. Are you sure you want something like this with me?” I gave the leather a little tug.

He shivered as I rubbed my hand over his, teasing his fingertips closer to his cock.

“I almost died yesterday, and you made sure that didn’t happen. It put a few things into perspective for me,” he murmured, then rocked his hips, enticing me to inch my palm down and cover his trapped cock. He was a sweet handful, and I rubbed my thumb along his shaft. Winter shuddered and bucked against my grip.

“Do you like this?”

“Yes. A lot.” He gave me a warm smile.

“You don’t have to do this or anything else with me. Are you sure you want it?” I leaned down and kissed along his cheek over to his ear. “You’re safe. I won’t hurt you, no matter

what you say. Well, I might hurt you, but not in a damaging way.”

He grinned as I leaned back. “Yes. I like it when you say you’ll protect me, and I like—” He jutted his hips, and I rubbed him harder. “—this. I want this.”

I let go of the leather and traced my hand along his side because I loved looking at the slim curve of his body and touching him was even better. “You deserve to have someone who will respect you and treat you like gold, Winter. Do you understand that?”

He glanced away. When I gave his cock a light squeeze, he whined.

“But you disobeyed me. Go upstairs to my room and get in that big, comfortable bed. Take these off first.” I tugged at the side of his briefs, snapping the elastic against his skin.

“Okay.” He raised his other hand above his head and unwound my belt from his wrist, and I leaned in to kiss the pulse point on his neck.

“Okay, what?”

He flushed and teased his hands down the sides of his briefs, shoving them off. “Okay, Daddy.”

“Good boy.” I helped him peel the fabric down his thighs and stared as his thick cock came into view. He was surprisingly big for such a short guy. I’d known he dyed his hair, but it was almost a shock to see the neatly trimmed dark pubes surrounding his thick shaft. Fuck, I wanted to touch him. I moved down his body, dropping kisses in a line along the center of his chest and soft belly, then planted a kiss on the tip of his excited cock.

“More, more, shit,” he said, pushing his hips upward so that his cock waved in the air. “Please, Daddy? I want it, Daddy.”

Ah, the real Winter was a work of art. His skin flushed from his forehead down to the wide bell of his cockhead and precum beaded in the slit. He grabbed my shoulders and held on for dear life when I licked from the root of his shaft

upward, tracing the veins, then popped my lips over the tip. The tiny, surprised gasps from him that filled the air made me consider blowing him until he flooded my mouth with his load.

“Fuck. Please. I need you, Daddy,” Winter sighed out, and a tidal wave of adrenaline rushed through me. This pretty man wanted me to touch him and make him feel good. I sucked the precum out of his slit, and he tried to fuck my mouth, but I sat back, leaving him glistening with my spit, legs splayed and chest heaving.

“Go upstairs and get in my bed, where you should’ve been already.” I lightly slapped his cock—not enough to hurt, only get him to move. It bounced against his abs. He squeezed his eyes closed and nodded, sitting up. When he stood his cock bobbed in front of him, and I couldn’t say why, but I found that adorable, too, just like the pout that had taken over his mouth. I sat up on my knees.

“Wait. Your punishment. I’m going to give it to you right now.”

“P-punishment?” he asked, staring at me with wide blue eyes. His toes dug into the carpet and his hands opened and closed like he couldn’t decide whether or not he should run, but his cock stiffened even more and curved up to try and kiss his belly button.

I winked at him and opened my mouth wide, taking him the whole way down. I wasn’t an instinctive deep throater, but I knew how to relax my jaw and took myself right to the point of gagging, working him with my lips and tongue until his natural sex drive took over and he started to rock his hips. When he really began to get into things, moaning and running his hands through my hair to tug on it, I sat back, turned him around, and sank my teeth lightly into one of his perky asscheeks.

“Ouch,” he said with a laugh. He glanced back over his shoulder at me.

“If I’d found you in my bed, you would’ve already been coming.” I winked at him. “Good boys who listen get the best

treatment, and that includes coming in Daddy's mouth."

His nostrils flared and he nodded as he rushed toward the staircase. I winced when halfway up it sounded like he slipped and there was a *thump*.

"I'm fine, Daddy," he said with a laugh, then the sound of him scrambling the rest of the way up the steps had me chuckling.

Slowly, I got to my feet, giving him time to get to my bedroom, hopefully without any more accidents. I unbuckled my pants and stepped out of them, then peeled my socks off and left them on the floor as I stalked after him. I hadn't intended to do this when I got home, and I was dead on my feet, but it had been so long since I'd trusted someone enough to bring them into my home. I still wasn't sure this was a good idea or that Winter was telling me the truth. Hell, he could be working with Vance for all I knew, drawing me in to finish me off, but I wanted to plant my cock in that bouncy ass and fill him to the brim with my sauce.

Fuck it. I want him. I picked up my holster and slipped it back over my shoulders; although, I had no idea why. It wasn't as if I was going to shoot him, even if he did turn out to be lying to me. I was too much of a fucking sap for that.

When I got upstairs, I wandered through the living room toward the master bedroom. The house was too big for just me, but it didn't feel as lonely since Winter was here. The lights were all blazing, and I thought maybe they'd been on when I got home, but I didn't honestly remember. I was too intent on getting inside. I tracked him down to my bedroom. He was lying on top of the green comforter, and he stole my breath. I leaned against the doorjamb.

"Jerk off for your Daddy," I said lazily.

Winter stared at me and ran his hands down his flat abs, almost like he was apprehensive. "You're sure?" he asked quietly.

"Oh yeah, I want to see you do it. Wait." I went to the low dresser on the right side of the room and opened the top

drawer where I kept my handkerchiefs—and my supplies. I took out a bottle of lube and tossed it over to him, and I was surprised that he easily caught it. I grabbed a box of condoms and took it with me as I stalked over to the bed.

He'd already slicked up his palm, and I loved watching him carefully coat his fat cock, especially since it was so large compared to the rest of him. It was a surprising delight. He expertly started at the base, twisting his hand, and slathered the gel upward until his flesh was shiny. He used both hands, and I couldn't get enough of the enthusiastic way he gripped himself. A little grin stretched across his lips as he spread his legs and got into it, stroking the shaft with the left one and squeezing his cockhead with the right.

He stared at me with his heels on the bed and his knees bent just enough that I could imagine fucking him that way, and all the blood in my body rushed south so fast I heard my pulse pounding in my ears.

“Daddy, I thought you wanted to do things with me?” He stared up at me and a furrow formed between his brows.

“I am. Daddy wants to see how you touch yourself. This way I know what you like.”

He moaned and dropped his head back against a pillow, then really let loose. The hand wrapped around his cock flew and he swirled his thumb around his slit. When his thighs started to strain and he began to have a hard time breathing, I crawled onto the bed.

“Daddy says stop.”

“Fuck. No.” He shook his head and bit his lip, still jerking off. “Please, Daddy. I need to come.”

“Winter, I said stop,” I growled out.

His stomach muscles trembled and he dropped his cock. I expected him to be angry, but there was something close to pain glinting in his eyes instead, and I hated that. “Daddy, I want it.”

“Let me take care of you, sunshine. I'm going to fuck you to make you feel good.”

He grinned and nodded. “Yes, please. You’re right. It’s been an awful twenty-four hours, and I want to feel better.”

My chest went tight, but I shook off the feeling. I hadn’t really expected too much from him since we hadn’t known each other long, and it was fine if he needed someone to support him and make him empty his balls while his life was falling apart. Maybe we could talk about a more permanent arrangement sometime soon if he had a good time now.

Or maybe I was insane for thinking he was ready for a full-time Daddy after half a blowjob and one exhibitionist show.

The lube bottle had somehow gotten on the other side of the bed, so I stretched over to get it, and he peppered kisses across my pecs, then swiped his tongue over my nipple. The *idea* of his mouth on my tit got to me more than anything else because my nips weren’t the most sensitive, but he moaned when I stopped and let him latch on for a second. He grazed his teeth over my nub, and I pulled back.

“Naughty boy. I didn’t say you could do that.”

His eyes widened. “I’m sorry, Daddy.” He licked his lips and darted a glance at my chest, though, and I thought he might be the type of boy who enjoyed keeping his mouth busy. Pleasure twisted through me. This discovery of his quirks was a soft joy that I couldn’t quite put into words, but I liked it as much as having his cock in my mouth.

“I forgive you,” I murmured, and the relief that flashed across his expression had my stomach jumping with anticipation.

This was going to be so fantastic. I dumped a good amount of lube on my fingers, then settled in and teased my hand between his legs. He was quick to tilt his ass up and give me full access with a smirk.

“You know what you like, huh?” I asked with a laugh.

He glanced away and shrugged as I began to circle his hole with my slick fingers. Winter flashed me a tremble of a smile and his eyes closed. He drew his bottom lip into his mouth. I rubbed against his rim, waiting for him to relax. I’d been with

men who took a bit longer than others to let me in, and I was patient enough, but when a few minutes went by and he was still sealed up tighter than a drum, I leaned down to kiss his mouth. I kept teasing him until he let go of that bottom lip, and then I sucked on it.

“Winter?”

He shuddered as I tapped his hole, eyes still firmly shut. “Yes, Daddy?”

I shook my head and thought about telling him not to call me that for a few minutes, because I needed to ask what was going on in his head that was keeping him from letting me into his sweet body, but I wanted to be his Daddy—all day long. I cleared my throat. “Sunshine, you gotta let me in.” I nudged the tip of one finger against his entrance again.

“What do you mean?” He opened his eyes and stared at me. “Just do it. You know, just fuck me.”

“What do you think is going to happen here?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“You’re going to fuck me.” He teased his fingers across my dick where it was still stuck in my boxers.

I nodded. “Okay, and what are you imagining happening when I do that?” I brushed his hair back from his forehead and swirled my middle finger harder around his hole, pressing firmly, but nope, I still wasn’t getting in there.

“Uh. . . .” The flush on his face grew brighter. “I know what happens when people have sex.”

I nodded. “Okay. Have you ever been with a man?”

He shook his head.

“Woman?”

Another headshake.

“Anyone?”

He raised his hands and wriggled his fingers. “Does this count, Daddy?” He swallowed hard enough that I could hear the click of his throat.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I murmured.

“Didn’t want you to stop. I want it.” He wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a kiss, which I allowed, since I needed it as much as he did. I hadn’t exactly been ravaging him like an animal earlier, but I found myself wanting to be tender with him, and I slid my arm under his head, cradling him closer. I drew his leg up onto my hip and toyed with his ass while I sucked on his tongue.

“Good boys who tell the truth get rewards,” I whispered against his lips. “Can you let me inside so I can give you one? Push out. Relax. Trust me.”

He nodded, and finally—*finally*—I got a finger in the tight heaven of his hole. I had no idea how long I played with him—stretching him, toying with his P-spot—but eventually he ground his cock against my abdomen, then fucked back on my fingers in a steady rhythm that was driving me close to the brink.

“I want to be in this ass when you come. I want you to draw a direct connection to that deep prostate pleasure and my dick. I want you to come after me any time you’re horny and beg me to fix it for you. That’s what your Daddy wants, sunshine.”

“Daddy, please.” He moaned when I tugged my fingers free. I’d managed to get three into him. He sucked little kisses onto my throat. I could die happy right now. I pressed my lips to his and loved the way his mouth molded to mine and how he softly whimpered. One night with him wouldn’t be enough. Hell, a year might not be enough.

“Daddy has you,” I murmured.

“I’ve been lonely, Daddy.” He kissed the corner of my mouth.

“Do you need someone to take care of you, sweet boy?” I stroked his cock and loved how he squirmed against me.

“Yes, Daddy,” he said, then pressed his lips to mine again. Now that I knew he hadn’t been with anyone else I could tell he was running on primal urges, but that only meant he would

be devastating as a lover once he had some experience. He would make the best boy.

It was all too much. I rolled Winter flat onto his back and shoved at my underwear. He helped me get the boxers down my thighs, and then I kicked them off. He reached for my dick, and I was happy as hell to let him map out the territory since I was going to put it directly into his teeny-tiny asshole.

“Can you take this off, too?” He tugged at my leather holster, which I’d forgotten about. “I hate violence, but this is fire.” I was stunned when he arched off the bed and kissed the grip of my Glock. My cock gave a throb, and I could feel the hot dribble of precum pearling in my slit.

“You know I’ll protect you, right? I’ll keep you alive during this mess.”

He nodded. “Yes, Daddy. Thank you, Daddy.”

I took the gun out of the holster, intending to put it on the nightstand. He snagged my wrist and kissed along the barrel, watching me the entire time. My balls tightened and I’d never wanted to be in a man so much. I wasn’t sure I would make it at this rate. I grabbed my cock at the base and held it tight, shuddering as he ran his soft cheek against the black metal of my gun.

“No more, sunshine. That isn’t safe, baby boy. It’s not a toy.” I set the gun on the nightstand pointed away from us, and he grasped the leather holster, using all his strength to drag me down on top of him.

“Fuck me, Daddy, please,” he whispered into my ear, voice quavering.

“Let me get the condom,” I said, feeling stupid and out of control.

“Daddy, just you. Fill me up.”

“You want Daddy’s sauce in your ass?” I asked him, and he smirked and leaned back to look me in the eye. “I’m asking, is it okay, Winter? I’m negative.”

He nodded. “I trust you, Daddy.”

I closed my eyes because he really shouldn't put that much faith in me, not right away, not with barely knowing me, and while I wanted this more than anything, his nature was exactly how Vance had fucked him over and weaseled into his life. That dickwad was still the fucking sneak thief I'd proven him to be ten years ago. Then I'd felt the pain of his knife slicing across my throat. I snagged a condom from the box and opened it. Winter pouted as I slid it on.

"If you still want Daddy's sauce in your tight little hole later, I'll do it. I promise." I kissed him and licked deeply into his mouth, trying to make up for not being bare in his ass by eating as much of the rest of him as possible.

He nodded. "Make me come, Daddy. Fuck me as hard as you want."

"Oh, be careful what you tell bad men like me to do with you," I said, lips brushing his.

"You're good, Daddy. I know it." His smile was sweet as he rested back against the bed, and I shoved his legs up closer to his chest. It probably would've been easier to have him ride me for his first time, but that wouldn't have satisfied the feral need that boiled inside me to fucking own him—it would've been half measures. I was as careful as I could be while easing into his body. I watched my dick disappear into the tight slice of bliss. His toes wriggled, which was fucking cute, as I sank deep into his ass, stretching his rim wide.

He wrapped his arms around my neck, holding on for dear life, and I began to fuck him carefully, but it didn't take long for him to start whimpering and shifting around, and as soon as I found the perfect angle to bump along his prostate, he snapped and began to thrust against me. I shoved his thighs together and draped them over my left arm, holding them in the air. With every last bit of my coordination, I stroked his cock with my right hand. It wasn't going to take long for this to be over. I could already feel the tension building in the base of my spine.

Winter was beautiful as he whined and panted.

“Daddy, I want to come on your cock,” he said around a gasp.

Groaning, I squeezed his shaft gently. “Okay. Whatever you want, sunshine.”

I dropped his dick and gritted my teeth. I’d been stroking him because I was too close to the edge, but now I would have to torture us both. His eyes were glazed with passion and his body glowed with sweat. I thought of literally anything except the perfect squeeze of his hole around me and how fucking good he smelled. I kissed him and tried to peg his prostate with shallow strokes.

Not long later he screamed out his pleasure into my mouth, since I refused to stop kissing him, and the warm splatter of his cum on my stomach was like a starter pistol in my brain. I buried my cock deep in his body and rutted while he moaned and scrabbled at my shoulders. His fingernails dug into my skin and I loved the burn.

Winter is exquisite. I thrust deep and stayed there as pleasure sliced through me and blanked out my mind for a few ecstatic moments. I stared into Winter’s dazzling blue eyes and grinned, and he dragged his fingernails through the scruff on my jaw.

“So good, Daddy,” he said on a happy sigh.

I nodded. “You’re a perfect boy, Winter. You take care of your Daddy so well.”

He shuddered and his eyes squeezed shut. “You can’t say stuff like that.”

“But it’s true.”

He buried his face against my shoulder, and I held on to him. After a while, I eased out of his ass, even though I would’ve loved to stay there forever. I didn’t bother doing anything I should’ve. I only peeled the condom off and tossed it, then dragged the blankets around us. I didn’t go lock up or even eat something like I’d originally planned to do. No, I held him tight and cuddled him close. He was such a fucking

sweetheart, and I didn't want to be anywhere else, not even just twenty feet away in the kitchen.

Sunshine poked at my eyes, but then it was abruptly cut off. I tensed. Something had woken me up, and I wasn't sure what. I reached for my gun, but it wasn't in my holster, though the leather still clung to my shoulders.

“Aw, how cute. I didn't think this would happen. Shooting you was just going to be something on my to-do list before I blew out of town, but now I get to take care of two birds with one stone.” I blinked my eyes open and glared.

Vance stood there, looking as good as he ever had, with a gun in his hand, the same pearl-handled revolver I'd given him as a Christmas present a million lifetimes ago. He was older than when I'd last seen him, but he was lucky enough that time had only made him more handsome. “Good morning, *Daddy*,” he said, giving me one of his winning smiles. “You have something useful I want.”

WINTER



SOMEONE GRABBED MY LEFT UPPER ARM, DRAGGING ME OUT OF a dead sleep, and it hurt like a vice grip had been tightened around my muscles and dug into my skin. Normally it took me ten minutes to fully wake up, but the pain jumpstarted my heart. I tried to jerk away from the sensation, but couldn't, and opened my eyes.

“What the heck? Van? Is that you?” I flailed. He looked bizarre in a green sweater and black jeans because I'd only ever seen him in a suit. His longish hair was combed back and fell in artful waves that he must've taken time to create with product. Even now, he was concerned with his appearance. He dragged me out of the pile of blankets I'd been sleeping in with RJ, and as the cool air of the room hit my cock embarrassment had my face heating. I tried to cover myself with my free hand while attempting to yank away from him, but it didn't entirely work. My stomach roiled.

I could safely mark public nudity off my list of kinks. I did not like this.

It only registered that Van was holding a gun when he stuck the dangerous end in my face. I tried not to picture what would happen to me if he pulled the trigger, but I had an extremely detailed and unforgiving imagination. He shook me around, and I winced.

“It didn't take you long to move on, huh? I've had someone pick another man over me, but not usually in less

than twenty-four hours. I'm glad you're still alive because I have shit for you to do." He knocked the gun against my temple, and I hissed at the pain that crawled all around my left eye. "But I wouldn't have minded if you'd died since you let him dick you down." He chuckled as if he'd just told the funniest joke anyone had ever heard, and it was the same sound I used to think was charming. "Come on, you cockslut. Walk."

"*Move on?*" My mind was still stuck on half speed. I wanted to struggle against him but was terrified he would shoot me. This wasn't the same man who'd worked for me and had happily been at my beck and call, any time of the day or night. "We didn't even have a single date! I told you I wouldn't go out with someone who worked for me," I said, still not quite with it, despite everything. This was all very confusing, and I wished I had my clothes on. "Shit, where are my underwear?"

RJ slowly got to his feet on the opposite side of the bed, and I couldn't help but stare. He was tall and muscled and nudity was a good look on him. His cock swung in a way that had me salivating, even with something awful happening. His stubble should've made him unkempt, but all it did was add a ruggedness that made my fingers itch to touch him all over.

"You're fucking dead, Cromwell." RJ pointed at Van and the way he talked as if he knew Van had me on edge.

"His name is Van Cramer," I mumbled, glancing at Van. "Isn't it?"

Van rolled his eyes. "Cromwell? Still stuck in our days on the force, Chandler? Here's a news flash. The old times are dead and gone." Van raised the gun and aimed at RJ, but I shoved his arm. The shot that rang out in the bedroom made my ears throb, but RJ ducked. He hadn't been hit—I hoped. There was no blood anywhere.

Van bared his teeth and shot around the room, the criminal version of a toddler having a temper tantrum. A bullet shattered the mirror over the dresser, a big window, hit the bed, and then he fired again in RJ's direction but didn't hit him

this time, either. I wasn't sure if he'd missed by accident or on purpose and didn't want to find out. I tried to dart away, but Van wrapped an arm around my waist and held me tight, and it didn't seem to matter how much I threw my weight around, I didn't get far.

I fucking hated that I was naked and touching him.

RJ hopped on the bed and jumped. With a *thud*, he landed beside us, and I was in shock with how quickly he drew back his meaty fist and slammed it into Van, right over his spine. Van groaned but jammed his gun hard against my ribs.

"Fuck, ow!" I crumpled at the awful pain from the blow, but Van held me tight against his front, and I didn't fall. The muzzle was burning hot, too, and I tried to squirm away from the metal, sobbing.

"Back the fuck off unless you want me to blast a hole in his rib cage," Van snarled. "I could decide it's all a wash right here and now. Do you want your *boy* dead at your feet?"

RJ took several steps back, but his jaw was hard, and I could see Van's death in his eyes.

"Why do you want me?" I asked. Goose bumps raced over my skin and I tried not to take deep breaths because it hurt my ribs.

Van's arm tightened around my middle. "Someone who contacted me wants you to make them a custom piece of jewelry, and he already paid me a pretty penny to make it happen. Nothing I stole will work for him." Van's tone was pissy and irritated, which only served to enrage me beyond the point of being scared. I turned and punched at his arm, trying to get him to let go.

"Aw, boo-hoo, nothing you took that you didn't work for will make your shady customer happy!" I tried to elbow him, but he dug the gun harder against my side, and I stopped as my knees began to shake from the pain. "They could've just gone to the shop and paid!"

Van snorted, and I hated that I could feel his breath on my ear. "Not with the bougie prices you charge. Believe it or not,

this is cheaper for the customer.” He slid the gun around to my back and jabbed a new spot. “Behave yourself.”

“You have no idea what I charge for custom pieces. You only worked with the premade jewelry. I have always tried to be reasonable. I have to pay for my materials and time.” Outrage had me struggling again. “This was all over money?”

Van slid his hand low on my belly and I stilled, all at once acutely aware of my nudity. “What isn’t, pretty boy?”

RJ glared and a red stain spread across his cheeks and nose. “Take your fucking hands off him, now.”

“Aw. You always were just two steps behind me, you annoying fuck. I won’t stop touching him, but I’ll do it where you don’t have to see, in deference to what we used to share.” He blew a kiss at RJ. Confusion had me staring between them. How did they know each other? What did they share? Damn it, this was too much first thing in the morning.

Van dragged me out into the living room, then down the stairs, so he must be familiar with the layout of the house—or maybe he’d snooped around before he woke us up. Even though he’d implied he was going to be gross, he shoved me away when we reached the spot where I’d tossed my clothes last night. I dressed while he stared at the stairs to make sure RJ wasn’t following us. A warm glow settled in my chest because he was *scared* of RJ.

My phone was a lump in the back pocket of my pants, and I patted it. I had a second of internal celebration. Hopefully, I could call the cops.

“I can’t find my socks,” I muttered, more just because it was annoying than anything.

“Like I care. Go without them.” He rolled his eyes and grabbed the back of my neck, hauling me in the direction of the door that would take us outside.

“What do you have against RJ?” I asked.

“He’s fun for a hot minute, but it gets old. Trust me, I’m doing you a favor.” He smirked.

“What are you? A con man?”

Van stopped pointing the gun at me but didn't put it away. I wasn't sure if me being dressed was an improvement because it meant he was going to try to take me somewhere. I definitely didn't want to leave with him. No, I would rather die now than after whatever he might decide to do with me later.

He grinned. “I am a world class thief. Now I'm stealing you.” He winked and it was smarmy. God, what had I been thinking last night?

My insides went cold as he skimmed his gaze from my naked feet up to my eyes. “That's kidnapping.”

Van dragged his hand down my arm and snagged mine. “Not if you want to go. Come on, you want to be with me more than RJ. That lawman is boring as fuck.” He marched toward the door that led to the carport, and I hissed as my feet hit the freezing cement in the utility room. I was already cold, but at least he let me stop to put my boots on. He smiled and grabbed my leather coat, holding it up in a hideous parody of RJ's gentlemanly behavior. I glared at him while I fed my arms through the sleeves.

When Van took my elbow and yanked me out the door into the frigid snowy morning, it occurred to me once again that I really didn't want to fucking go anywhere with him. The cold air slapped me awake and blasted a fresh wave of adrenaline through my body.

I tried to twist out of his grasp. For some messed-up reason, in the back of my mind I'd thought he might let me go and tell me it was all a really bad joke, but no, he wanted me to get into his fucking car and go who the hell knew where.

He'd already tried to kill me once.

I wouldn't survive if I allowed this to happen, I just knew it.

I threw an elbow into Van's gut and this time it landed. He let out an *oomph* and swung at me. The butt of the gun connected hard with my jaw, and the flash of the pearl handle in the sunlight peeking through the clouds blinded me. My

head spun and I dry heaved. I fell on my ass on the cold cement pad that made up the carport, and he tried to lift me one-handed, but my belly heaved again. I wasn't able to help him move me at all, even if I'd wanted to do such a thing.

RJ burst out of the door only dressed in gray suit pants, boots, and the leather holster, which reminded me of his cock sinking into my body, and he had a mean-looking black gun in his hands. Van sprinted and slid over the hood of his silver Porsche—a terrible scratching noise caused me to wince—then he fell on the other side as RJ opened fire.

Pop! The loud sound was audible over the gunshots. The left front tire deflated until black rubber was flat on the ground.

“Motherfucker!” Van yelled before rearing up. He aimed at RJ but didn't seem very confident and cursed, ducking back down to hide again.

Everything seemed to be happening a hundred times faster than real life normally worked. I had zero control of anything. RJ already had his gun aimed and took a shot at the Porsche. A hole appeared on the hood that made me think he hoped it would go through and hit Van.

Nothing happened; he must've missed.

Van leaned around the front bumper and got off a shot at RJ.

RJ didn't budge, but blood began to stream down his right calf, staining his suit pants. RJ fired again, and Van spun away, clutching his left ear as blood ran between his fingers in a scarlet river. He disappeared behind the Porsche again.

RJ started forward in a crouch. Blood dotted the ground behind him, and I panicked, frozen in place.

With a loud growl Van hopped out from the rear of the Porsche, and I almost fainted as he aimed his gun directly between my eyes. He squeezed the trigger and there was a *click*. I clutched at my chest and watched blood dribble down his neck.

“Move away from him,” RJ said firmly. He had his gun pointed at Van. His hand shook, though, and his face was pale. He limped as he came back around the Porsche.

“Fuck,” Van snarled, shaking his revolver as if it was broken. He tossed the gun at RJ, who caught it. That split second distraction allowed Van to launch himself at RJ, and he went after his injured leg, kicking it. RJ went down with a grunt.

“Fuck this,” I snarled, jumping on Van’s back, but he twisted and knocked me to the ground beside RJ.

“What are you doing?” RJ yelled, and he dropped Van’s gun and dragged me close.

Van took the opportunity to run around and get in the Porsche.

“Fuck,” RJ forced us both to our feet as Van started the car, and he dragged me back into the house.

“Why did you bring us in here?” I shivered. “Shouldn’t we be out there?”

RJ kissed the side of my head. “Wouldn’t put it past the asshole to try and run you over.”

Despite the flat tire, Van put the Porsche in Reverse and backed down the driveway with the rim clunking as it went. RJ strode out as fast as he could and took another shot, which spidered the glass of the windshield. He cursed and shoved his gun back in the holster.

“What are you doing?” I screamed at RJ as he yanked open the driver-side door of the Roadster and hopped in.

“Killing him,” he bellowed before he slammed his door.

I darted over and opened the passenger door. “You’re injured! Stop!”

“So is he.” RJ shook his head at me and revved the engine.

“No, please no. Just stop. We’ll find him again when you’re not bleeding.” I cupped my hands under my chin,

begging. My head throbbed and my gut ached. I wanted to go back in the house.

He shook his head, and I plopped in the seat, then closed the door. I grabbed the seat belt and buckled it.

“Get out!” He jammed his finger toward me.

“No!” I glared at him and crossed my arms. “If you’re going, I’m going.”

He shrugged and backed out of his parking spot. “Fuck it, fine. Get the mags out of the glove compartment for me.”

I did as he told me, fumbling to get the little door open. A ring of keys jingled, and I slid them aside, sorting through some papers until I found a small box with a couple of magazines inside hidden underneath everything else. Taking a deep breath, I pulled the ammo out.

“Van knows you. He was close to you.” I tried not to sound too accusing, but I couldn’t help it. He popped the magazine out of his gun while he was turning the car around and handed it to me, and I gave him a new one that he slammed into the gun, popping the weapon down against his thigh to do it and never taking his eyes off the lane.

“Vance did this,” RJ said, pointing at the wicked-looking scar on his neck.

“You had to have known last night when you saw him! Why didn’t you say anything?”

He shrugged. “You could’ve been working with him.”

Hurt sank its fangs into my heart. This morning I’d let RJ do things to me that no one else ever had and he didn’t even trust me? “You thought I was a terrible person who would conspire against you and slept with me anyway?”

“Well, if it helps, I don’t believe there’s much of a chance you’re working with him anymore.” He gave me a crooked grin.

Shock sizzled through me, and I raised my hand to slap his face, but he captured my wrist. The gun balanced precariously

on his thigh where he'd dropped it. I glared at him, and he kept his eyes focused forward. "You still think it's a possibility?"

"The chances that someone will fuck me over are *never* zero."

I yanked my wrist away from him, and he drove the Roadster at a speed that had me clawing at the dashboard while I tried to force air into my lungs.

We got onto the road, and Van's Porsche was ahead of us. It wasn't going very fast because of the ruined tire. RJ probably knew more than me about these types of situations, but I was still angry with him. A green minivan pulled out in front of us, and RJ swore, dodging around them, going too fast for the snow and slush on the road.

All at once, RJ grabbed at his right leg and groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. His head began to bob toward his chest, and I panicked. Thankfully the Roadster was slowing down.

"RJ! RJ, are you okay?"

"What?" he asked, shaking his head as if a bee buzzed inside his skull and he wanted to get it out. The car began to drift to the right and his head slumped forward while he tried to reach his leg again.

"RJ, you're fucking driving!"

"What?" he asked again and sounded confused. "Fuck, this hurts."

His foot must've slipped off the gas, but we were still moving forward, and he wasn't stopping the Porsche.

"The brake! RJ, put your foot on the brake!" I pulled the emergency brake, but that didn't stop us because the tires caught ice, and in the end, I turned the wheel to keep us on the road, but the minivan was in front of us at a stop sign. I had no choice except to spin the wheel. I tried to go around a massive pine tree in someone's yard, but the Roadster clipped the trunk before slamming into a wooden fence that raised the front of the car into the air as momentum carried it halfway over.

I gasped as we jerked forward and finally stopped, but the airbags didn't deploy. My chest ached from slamming against the seat belt. "It all happened so fast. Oh no," I mumbled.

RJ had dropped his gun on the floor. I scrambled down to pick it up, but then what? My fingers closed over the metal warmed by his skin. Someone was bound to call the cops and we couldn't have this gun here when they showed up. What should I do?

"Fuck, are you okay? RJ! RJ, wake up!" I slapped lightly at his face and his head lolled back as his eyelids cracked open. He fumbled his phone out of his pocket. What should I do? He looked ridiculously cold and wasn't dressed for the weather. I unbuckled my seat belt and took off my leather coat, then tossed it over him.

"Are you calling an ambulance?"

"No," he said simply. "Go put that gun in the trunk."

I stared at him, feeling stupid. "The trunk?"

RJ nodded. "Hello, I need some help. Accident. Shit happened. Need to get my boy out of here. I'm armed." He mumbled a few other things I couldn't quite make out to the person on the other end of the line.

The owner of the house connected to the lawn we'd torn up came out onto his porch. Thankfully his home was a small ranch, so he probably wouldn't be one of those super entitled people, but there was no real way to tell how he would react. He didn't approach the car. I shoved the gun onto my seat and got out to wave at him. He was a skinny old man in a blue robe with a tuft of gray hair. "I'm sorry. Our brakes seem to have locked up or something. We're getting a tow truck and we'll be happy to pay for any damages."

The man nodded and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his robe. "I should still get your car insurance," he called in a craggy voice.

"In the glove compartment. Just give it to him."

I handed RJ the gun, and he put it on the floor of the car again, even though that wouldn't stop someone who was

searching for reasons for a wreck from finding it. I snatched out the insurance card and went over to talk to the man with my best *customer service* smile in place, and thankfully he was more concerned about his fence than anything. After reassuring him multiple times that I would pay for anything the insurance didn't cover and giving him my phone number, he went back into his house with an "I hope you're not hurt!"

By the time I turned around to go back to RJ, three other vehicles and a tow truck had arrived, which was insanely quick because I was certain I hadn't spent more than ten minutes talking to the old man. RJ got out of the Roadster, hobbling across the snow, and went over to get into the back of a red Audi with blood dribbling along behind him, leaving a horrific trail. He waved for me to follow him, and I was so worried about him that I rushed; although, the second I was on the seat at his side I was furious all over again.

He knew who Van was and didn't tell me. The fucking nerve. And he wasn't exactly spilling any details now, either!

The warm air flowing around the car from the vents was nice and made me slightly less angry. The Audi pulled away from the crime scene. Yes, it was a motherfucking crime scene because that's what it really was even if it appeared to be a harmless accident.

"Where are we going?" I asked the driver.

"The Courtesan Hotel." He glanced in the rearview mirror. With his long beard and leather vest he seemed more like a biker than anything.

"RJ needs a hospital."

"No," RJ said, resting his head back against the seat. "Fuck no. That'll only lead to questions. I have a gunshot wound. I need blood and some sleep."

"There's a doctor who will come to the hotel to fix him up for a price," the driver said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

RJ sighed, then chuckled. "Yeah, and the bastard has gotten more money out of me over the years than he

should've.”

“I don't think this is fucking funny. You need a hospital!” I said, trying not to look at the blood still running down his leg and pooling on the floor mat.

The driver said nothing when I tapped his shoulder. He didn't even glance back.

RJ grabbed me and pulled me against his warm chest. Tears I hadn't realized were forming in the corners of my eyes spilled over, and I wiped at them with the back of my hand. This was completely fucking ridiculous. The highest level of nuts.

“Daddy's got you.”

I wanted to be livid, hell I was madder than fuck, but I snuggled in close to his side and held on tight. “Thank you, Daddy. Thank you for not letting him take me.”



“I CANNOT BELIEVE THE TROUBLE THIS HAS CAUSED,” MADAM Winters said as I walked out of the bathroom. She rose from the green upholstered armchair next to the bed and smoothed the skirt of her short black dress down while a small furrow took over her brow. “You’re doing better?” She reached back and picked up a purple velvet shawl that had fallen from her shoulders, then wrapped it around herself.

“Yes,” I said, dragging the towel off my head that I’d had draped there to keep my shirt from getting dotted with water. “I’m fine.” I used my fingers to shove my hair forward so it wouldn’t be a huge mess. “The doc sewed up the chunk ripped off my leg. It’s not the first bullet to bite me.”

Winter snorted, but I didn’t glance at him. He’d been pissed off for three days and I didn’t want to get into it over my health again while Madam Winters was in the room.

She smiled in his direction, but he didn’t notice. “Very well then, sugar. I have faith that you’ll be able to solve this problem for everyone involved.” She gave me a breezy wave and stopped to pat Winter’s cheek lightly before she glided out of the door.

We’d been living in an extravagant emerald room at the Courtesan Hotel while I recuperated, courtesy of Madam Winters. Other than the oak furniture, every piece of fabric and fixture was some shade of green, and the rich layers of color, combined with the glimmering gold Turkish flowers on the

wallpaper, made me feel as if we were in a palace. I didn't think I liked it. I was a simple man and this was too much.

"Damn it," I growled as I took a step. My right leg stung and burned any time I put weight on it, but I was able to move around on my own. The first two days I'd mostly kept my leg elevated, and Winter had remained stonily silent while he'd fed me pain meds and run down to the kitchen to replace ice packs and bring snacks for me.

"You should be resting," Winter hissed from where he sat cross-legged on the bed in a pair of borrowed blue silky PJs. He crossed his arms and ignored me. Well, I didn't think he was ignoring me, so much as he was refusing to look at me while he seethed. He'd been this way since Vance had busted in on us. He'd demanded answers I wasn't prepared to give him about my history with Vance, and when I wouldn't say what he wanted to hear. . . this was the result.

I tossed the towel in the bathroom and finished buttoning up my white long-sleeved shirt. I kept an eye on Winter while I grabbed my black suit coat and slid it on over my gun holster. I stowed a few extra suits here at the Courtesan because I never knew what I would get into with work, and the fact that I had clothing on hand had gotten me a contemplative look from Winter, but he hadn't voiced any of his concerns. I patted my Glock, which Loredó had been good enough to return to me earlier this morning.

"Hey, sunshine, when are you going to be done being in a mood?"

"You lied to me!" He slapped his hands on the bed. That's all I'd gotten out of him for days, despite the fact that he'd taken care of me better than a nurse. Since I also had a thing against people who didn't tell the truth, his accusing attitude was understandable but starting to grate on my nerves anyway.

"How?" I walked over to the desk next to a massive arched window that looked out toward Lake Ontario, then picked up a stack of photographs of Vance I'd had printed from the security footage at Winter's jewelry shop.

“You know how. You knew Van. You didn’t tell me.” Winter leaned forward and squeezed his eyes shut. I hated how upset the gunfight had made him. He didn’t seem to have much of a stomach for blood and guts. When I’d been a cop, most of the men I’d been around had violence in their blood, and I loved that Winter was mostly a good guy. He opened his eyes to give me a long glare because even though he was still shaken up, he had some very serious opinions on the situation. “You’re not well enough to go do anything. The doctor told you to rest. He said to take antibiotics and pain meds and drink lots of fluids.” He pointed at the pill bottles on the dresser. “He told me to help you walk around the room.” Winter’s eyes shone with accusation.

“What do you expect me to do? We gotta track Vance down.” I flashed him one of the pictures from the top of the stack. “Madam Winters isn’t gunning for you right now, but she’ll expect me to see this through. Plus, you need this help. You’re still fucked over.”

Winter huffed. “I’m not asking you to hurt yourself. I won’t. Was Van your boy, too?” His gaze bore into my soul. Winter had asked the question several times, and I hadn’t answered it yet.

My heart twisted.

His nostrils flared and a deep blush flooded his cheeks. He shivered and hugged himself.

There were a hundred different things I could say, but in the end, I bit the tip of my tongue and left the room, limping and fighting through the pain. My body would cooperate or else. It had been a while since I’d had to slog through this type of injury, but I had to keep pushing forward. I was already going crazy from lying in a bed as long as I had, knowing the clock was ticking on this case.

Vance. I hadn’t been able to bring myself to shoot him dead the way I should’ve, but I’d had time on my back to get over that dangerous hang up. Seeing him pull a trigger on Winter—thank God he hadn’t managed to put a hole in him—destroyed the last of my lingering sentimental feelings.

Yes, I had to get this shit done. I started my work at the hotel bar. Fen, the bartender, hadn't seen Vance and shook his head as soon as I flashed the photo. I made my way around to all the service staff, asking if they'd run across Vance recently. I didn't want to leave Winter here alone to expand the search if he might be able to sneak in. I told each member of the security team to keep an eye out for Vance and left them with a photograph and strict instructions not to fuck up. Most people were scared of me already, and I had no doubt they would run straight to the madam with any info.

Darcy Winters stood behind the glossy wooden front desk glaring at me as I approached. He was a trim, pretty blond man who looked a lot like his mother, only he had the attitude of a yippy terrier. He had a boyfriend, and I had no idea how he kept him. As soon as I got close enough for Darcy to speak without shouting, he said, "Do not bring me trouble today. We have a wedding this week and I'm not in the mood. The caterer is already driving me up the wall, asking to use our refrigerators."

Grinning, I slid a photograph across the desk in front of him.

"What's this?" he asked, jutting his chin in my direction.

"Trouble. He stole some expensive jewelry from your mother, and I want the staff to know his ugly mug. They need to tell me or her if anyone sees him around here or out in New Gothenburg. This man's days are numbered." I raised my eyebrows and grinned.

Darcy groaned and ran a hand over his eyes. "And you're passing out photographs like it's 1997?"

My face heated as he gave me a snooty little glare. "Well, maybe. You got a better idea?"

He rolled his eyes and went into a back room with the photograph. I waited because I had the impression that he thought he knew something I didn't. A couple of minutes dragged by and when he came back out, he held up his phone and the photograph, crystal clear, was on the screen. After

three seconds of him messing around on his phone, mine buzzed, and I took it out.

The Winter Prince: If anyone sees this man, report it immediately to the front desk.

The photograph was attached.

“Everyone who works here just got the same message.” He sniffed. “Far more efficient.”

“Well, that’s handy.”

Ephraim came racing over to the front desk from the bar, holding his phone above his head. Half the time the man was dressed up when I saw him—his clients tended to be the type into fantasy stuff—and today he was wearing some bizarre outfit that was a cross between a nobleman—a blue surcoat billowed behind him—and a cowboy. He had rope hanging off his belt and a Stetson tilted on his head. With his clean-cut appearance, I supposed people liked to pretend he was rescuing them. His eyes were wide. “What did that guy do? Did he hurt someone when he was with them?”

“Why would you ask that?” Darcy demanded, his tone deadly.

Ephraim waited until he was right beside us before he murmured, “He asked me to dress up in the hotel uniform to fuck him.” A group of people on a historical tour being led by Madam Winters came through the lobby snapping photographs, and he turned his back to them as someone pointed in his direction. “That was a wild night. The guy said that he wanted to role play he was getting something extra for his tip. You know what I mean by extra?” He glanced between me and Darcy, and if he didn’t seem so sincere, I would’ve thought he was trying to joke, but maybe he was just that clueless.

“Everyone knows,” Darcy snapped. “Continue.”

Ephraim ducked his head. “The guy was pretty serious about it. He wanted me to pretend that I didn’t want him to touch me, but in the end, I give it to him. I mean, it’s not the

weirdest thing I've ever been asked to do." He shrugged. "The guy got off on it big time. I also had to remind him about ten times that he couldn't fuck me without a condom. Not a great customer. He tried to ghost the condom, but he was acting so fucking sneaky that I caught him."

I sighed. "Let me guess. He stole the uniform when you were finished?"

Ephraim shrugged and took his hat off to run his hand through his glossy brown hair. "Well, he left a massive tip, and I thought it was because he wanted my clothes and he was also such a raging dickhead, so I didn't bother saying anything. Some people act like an asshole, then pay for it. As long as they don't physically injure me, I usually just roll with it. It's my job."

"No, no, no," Darcy said, shaking his head. His face went red enough that I could've mistaken him for a stoplight. "That is unacceptable behavior."

I growled. "You should've told someone. The security here in the hotel is on call for a reason. He used that uniform to steal from Madam Winters."

Ephraim's eyes widened and he darted looks between me and Darcy, who scowled and rested his hands on the desk as if that was the only thing keeping him from going on a killing spree. "Oh no."

Darcy sighed. "You've all been told time and time again to report anything out of the ordinary. Never keep something like this to yourself again."

"Am I in trouble?" he asked, grimacing.

Darcy shook his head. "Even Mother would've been hard pressed to predict this, and she's all about client satisfaction. She might've given someone the uniform if they paid enough for it. *Don't ask questions about what makes other people horny.* I've heard it from her more than once."

"If he was a client he had to pay, right? And you take information for safety reasons?"

Darcy nodded at me and moved over to the computer, resting his fingers on the keyboard. “What name did he give you?” Darcy asked Ephraim.

He shrugged and the lights from the chandeliers sparkled on his dark hair with the movement. “Tyson? Tyson something.”

Darcy narrowed his eyes at Ephraim, then went back to typing on the keyboard. After a few minutes of searching, he growled. “I’m getting nowhere.” He grabbed the large red leather sign-in book and shoved it in my direction. “Look for Tyson something,” he said nastily.

“It’s not like I can be expected to remember every person I fuck,” Ephraim said defensively.

“Well, if Mother checked him in, she might have simply made him sign. She’s not as into keeping track of everything as I am. She’s more old-fashioned in some ways.” He shook his head.

This was some old-school police work, and I actually had a smile on my face as I scanned through page after page.

“Tyson Lokan?” I asked, tapping my finger on a bold signature.

“No, I know that client. Keep looking,” Darcy said, still poking at the keyboard and glaring at the computer screen.

Five more minutes passed. “Tyson Cromill. The asshole used an inversion of his last name. It’s Cromwell. He must’ve thought he was being funny.” I turned the book toward Darcy and pointed out the name.

He chuckled. “Oh, Mother must’ve checked him in. She’ll simply love it when I tell her.” His lips twitched and there was an impish light in his eyes.

“You’re going to get on her case for not making people show their ID and everything, aren’t you? He might’ve had a fake one. This wasn’t her fault, either, and we don’t need her in a bad mood over it.”

He rolled his eyes. “There’s so much paperwork involved that she probably just let him go with a promise to do it next time. If she’d scanned his ID, there’s a good chance she would’ve realized that it wasn’t real.” He tapped his fingers on the desk. “She probably didn’t bother. I always do that, at least, the first time someone is here. We have a bar, for goodness sakes. It’s only a trip across the lobby. She could’ve checked the ID there.” He shook his head and let out a happy little hum. “Okay, here he is. He paid with a check. That’s odd these days, especially for this type of thing.” Darcy wrote down an address on a sticky note and gave it to me. “Does that look familiar? It’s the address on the check.”

For a few seconds I stared because what I was seeing didn’t make sense. “Fuck, that’s Winter’s building. I wonder. . . . He might be staying in one of the unused floors, especially since the cops haven’t been there yet. Winter left most of the building empty, I think as a security precaution for his shop on the top floor.”

“So, I helped?” Darcy straightened up and gave me a real smile that almost made him seem sweet. Okay, if he acted this way at home, I could see where someone would want to put up with him.

“Maybe. It’s definitely something. Thanks.” I knocked my knuckles on the desk, and he gave me a nod before turning to say something that was undoubtedly nasty to a woman carrying two parts of a broken vase toward him with an apologetic frown.

It was torture taking the elevator upstairs to the room Madam Winters had put me in. My right calf throbbed with pain as I stomped along the hallway. When I got back to the room my stomach fell because Winter wasn’t on the bed and his borrowed PJs were folded nicely on the end of it.

He wasn’t in the bathroom.

He wasn’t anywhere.

He was gone.

“Fuck.” I took my phone out of my pocket to call him, then realized I didn’t have his number and sighed. He hadn’t needed to call me, and I hadn’t expected him to go anywhere. Hopefully he was rattling around in the hotel.

“Well, fuck. Only one thing to do.” I headed off to dig into the clue I’d uncovered.

WINTER



I STOMPED MISERABLY TOWARD THE REAR DOOR OF THE HIGH-rise I rented and rubbed my chest, shivering. Somehow my leather coat was missing and I wasn't able to find one before I left the Courtesan. As it was, my borrowed purple turtleneck was a little too big and my blue—*not black!*—pants wanted to slip down my hips. It had been years since I'd worn colors, and I wasn't pleased with it.

My mind was stuck on the same loop it had been in for days. I'd been happy to think of RJ as my Daddy, but *he doesn't trust me*. Shouldn't a Daddy trust his boy? I knew something must've happened between him and Van because I wasn't stupid, but I wanted to hear about it from him. Maybe throwing myself at RJ so soon had been dumb, but I'd really loved everything about him being my Daddy. I'd been excited to sleep with him. In the past I'd turned down other men, but there was something about RJ that made me happy inside and out. I patted my phone in my pocket and sighed. I'd asked the police to meet me here, but they'd said they wouldn't be able to arrive for at least an hour, if not longer.

"RJ doesn't want to be in a real relationship or he would've talked to me," I whispered, not for the first time. I'd had a couple of hours of insanity, and now I needed to pull my head out of the clouds and get my life back, and that meant filling out a report with the police the way I should've the very first night the robbery happened, contacting the insurance company, and then calling clients who had pieces scheduled

with me in January. I had no idea what my life was going to be like from here on out and the uncertainty was both scary. . . and exhilarating. I grinned. When I'd first started my business, I hadn't known from one month to the next if I would be able to afford to keep doing it, and by luck and with a lot of elbow grease it had all come together.

I could get Beaulieu up and running again.

Yes, I needed to do all those things, and I also needed to pack a bag. If I was going to stay at the Courtesan, which Madam Winters had insisted on, I at least wanted some clean clothes that were mine, rather than borrowing them from one of the men who worked in the hotel.

Glancing up at the building, I fought off a chill that ran down my spine. I didn't really think Van would be dumb enough to come back here after everything that had happened, so I didn't bother being quiet as I walked inside the back door and up the drab rear staircase. The floor I lived on was directly under Beaulieu, and I sighed when I reached it and pushed open the door.

"Fuck. Why not burgle the whole building?" I rolled my eyes. My couch was missing. I didn't own a TV or a lot of other things most people considered to be normal. My bookcases were undisturbed, so apparently Van hadn't found them interesting. I hadn't bothered checking this level the other night because there was nothing too important here. I paused, pondering whether or not it meant Van thought my purple Persian carpet was tacky, since it was still on the floor, when I heard a squeaking that sounded a hell of a lot like the old wrought iron bed frame I'd dragged here when I'd first moved in and hadn't bothered replacing.

I snuck toward the curtain I'd strung across the door. My bedroom mirrored the sales floor above, so it was massive. I peeked around the curtain into the other room and the air leaked out of me. Sunlight streamed in the tall windows and lit up Van like he was on a stage. He was fucking someone *in my bed*. Sweat glistened on his back, so I assumed he'd been at it for a while. I couldn't tell who was underneath him, but when he shifted to get a different angle to plow the poor guy, I could

see that the man on the bottom's hands were restrained with cuffs connected to the corners of the bed. Maybe the unlucky man was Pinky? The sounds the smaller guy was making were unhappy, close to sobs.

Then again, maybe I thought Pinky hated what was happening because I couldn't imagine anyone wanting Van's cock in their ass. I shuddered, but then fury sparked to life in me. Not only was Van the type of man to steal from his boss, but he was also screwing someone in my bed. *How fucking rude.* If Van was going to do that, then Pinky should at least sound like he was having the time of his life.

"Oh, fuck do you want it harder? Are you going to take it for me?" Van demanded, shocking me into letting the curtain flutter closed. I was quick to peek again, though.

"Yes, Sir," Pinky said, but his voice wavered, and I hated what I was seeing. It was nothing like how sweet RJ had been with me. Van smashed his body frantically against Pinky's.

If Van was here, did that mean everything he'd stolen from me was still somewhere in the building, too? Or was the jewelry gone? I stared at the two men fucking and my brain whirred. If the jewelry was gone and sold, that meant all that was left was *money*. So where was the cash? My gaze slid to the floor as I contemplated the situation. I considered the possibility that he'd done something as stupid as stuff a couple of sacks full of bills under the bed.

My attention landed on that gun with the shiny pearl handle. I touched my jaw where it still ached and there was a nasty purple bruise. The doc had said it wasn't broken, but I was lucky. The last time I'd seen the gun, it was in RJ's driveway, so Van must've gone back for it. *Does it mean something to him? Why take the risk?* The weapon wasn't directly beside Van, but rather on the floor more toward the end of the bed, as if maybe he'd taken it off and set it there when he and his. . . whatever Pinky was to him dropped their clothes. The rest of what they'd been wearing was strewn around the room.

Can I get close enough to grab the gun?

Van muttered to Pinky, low words that sounded mean.

Pinky sobbed again, nodding. “Yes, Sir.”

I edged into the room, hoping Van simply wouldn't notice. I snuck toward the gun, anger boiling in my blood. I'd had a couple of days to get enraged about him shooting RJ, and at this point I was more pissed off about that than my ruined business. Maybe RJ and I would never work out as a couple, but anyone who hurt him was still on my shit list. I was halfway across the wide room when Pinky glanced underneath Van's arm toward me. He averted his gaze back to Van and didn't say a word, which firmed up my resolve to help him.

Anyone who loved the man he was with would've been shouting already.

He'd been nervous when he'd taken the jewelry from me, and maybe he didn't want to be committing crimes with Van. Maybe he was stuck somehow. My heart pounded in my ears and I rushed the last few feet. With my head feeling floaty, I snatched the gun off the floor. Van didn't notice me until I touched the muzzle to the back of his head. I stared over his shoulder at Pinky, who had tears streaming down his face.

“Did Van break your nose?” I asked Pinky, the question burning at the forefront of my mind. It was an old injury at this point, but I'd been wondering about it since I'd realized they worked together.

Pinky stilled and glanced at Van, as if he was scared to say a word.

“You found me.” Van lazily rolled his hips again, and I shoved the gun harder against his head.

“Stop hurting him. Get off him.”

Van snorted. “He asked me to do this.”

Pinky hissed when Van slid back onto his knees. Van gestured at Pinky's groin, but I refused to look because I didn't want to violate his privacy. “He likes it. He's my boyfriend, you idiot.”

“I like it,” Pinky said quietly as Van glared at him. “I love having him fuck me like this.”

“Is this what you wanted to do to me?” I asked, not moving the gun away from Van.

He laughed and turned to sit on his ass on the bed, not bothering to cover Pinky up or let him free from his restraints. “Are you going to shoot me or what?” He rolled his eyes and his gaze was cold when it landed on me again. “Because I’m bored with this.” He gave me a smug smile.

I backed away from him and my hand shook. I took careful aim at his head. It would make everything so much easier if I just shot him now, wouldn’t it? He would’ve killed me. Hell, he tried to kill me, and I only had RJ to thank for standing here right now. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, he was still giving me that awful smile.

“Where’s the money?” I shoved the gun in his direction. “Tell me.”

“Oh, now you sound like a businessman.” He drifted his hand down his belly and I tried not to look because he was still hard and sitting there like he thought I would want to come over and join him on the bed, but I would rather eat raw sewage. There was a small bandage over his left ear. Right, he’d been shot. A vicious part of me wished the injury had been worse.

My body trembled. I wanted to hurt him for shooting RJ and stealing and making my life hell. I pulled the trigger on the gun and gasped as fire blazed across my temple. I slapped my hand there and blood gushed between my fingers.

Van snorted. “You moron. This is solid concrete construction.” He turned and pointed at a mark on the wall across the room, a black spot marring the white paint. “You caught ricochet. What a dumbass. If you’re going to shoot someone, you need to hit them.” Van chuckled and stood.

Pinky attempted to curl up into a ball but really couldn’t. I backed away from Van as he began to stalk toward me.

Van's smug expression transformed to something nearly gleeful. "Aw, what's wrong? You're fine making money from exploitation. Those diamonds and gems don't come without a blood price. It's not so nice when someone does it to you, is it?"

"Don't pretend you're noble," I shouted. "You hurt RJ. You're the man who tried to murder him—twice."

"Yeah, I made the attempt more times than that, actually. I wasn't aiming for him with the elevator—" He shrugged. "—but I did want him dead that first time."

I backed up until my shoulders hit the wall, then slid into the corner. *I'll shoot him if he gets close enough that I can't miss.* I slid down toward the floor. Pinky had one hand free and he was working on his other restraint. My chest squeezed. How did he do that? He could help me, unless he didn't want Van dead.

"Aw. You're too scared to shoot me. That's almost cute." Van reached for me.

My hands were sweaty. I needed to pull the trigger, needed to fire the gun.

A loud blast hurt my ears and I flattened against the wall. I glanced at the gun in my hand, confused. I hadn't fired. Van crumpled, half on me, and I shoved him away, kicking. I didn't think, instead reacting on some feral impulse to not have him touching me while his cock was out.

Pinky had a gun in his hand, and for a second I was worried he would shoot me, too, but he only dropped it on the mattress and began clawing at the other cuff on his wrist. I scrambled around Van—or maybe his corpse—and rushed over to help him. There was a safety release on the leather cuff, but Pinky wasn't hitting it just right, and I had to push the tiny lever hard enough that my thumbs ached to get the cuff to unravel. I dragged the blankets up his body, so he wasn't sitting there naked, and he flashed me a small smile of thanks.

"Are you okay?" I asked, because it was much easier to focus on him than Van.

He nodded but didn't say anything, so I doubted that was true.

“Holy fuck! What the hell?” RJ's voice rang in the room.

I stood and raised the gun, then let it fall to my side again as RJ came limping toward me as fast as he could with the curtain across the door fluttering closed behind him. He opened his arms, and I ran over and buried myself against his front.

“What is going on here?”

I shrugged and sagged against him as he took the gun from my hand, and maybe I shouldn't rely so much on a man who didn't trust me, but I promptly lost my shit and began to cry because I'd never seen a dead body and I was pretty sure Van was finished.



WINTER SOBBING WAS MY LEAST FAVORITE THING IN THE world. His breath sounded like he might not catch it again, as if he was dying a little with every heave of his slim body, and I held him closer as I surveyed the damage that had been done. Shuffling around, I slipped Vance's pearl-handled revolver into my waistband.

The room didn't seem like much of one anyone really lived in, and I wasn't sure if it had been stripped of everything except the bed, a lamp, and a long rack of clothes against one wall, or if it had started out that way. The man curled in a ball on the bed had my blood boiling because he was here with Vance, and I raised my Glock to point it at him.

"No," Winter said, voice scratchy. "Pinky saved me."

The man in question chuckled in a dire way and jerked his chin to get his floppy brown hair out of his eyes. "It's actually Piers. Pinky was the only thing I could come up with when you asked." He shrugged. "I don't think well under pressure. I didn't expect you to care about my name."

There was something sad about that—not thinking anyone would want to know him—but I wasn't friends with Vance's fuck toy, so I kept an eye on him, even though I allowed Winter to win me over as he gestured at me to put my hand down. I stopped pointing the gun directly at Piers.

I didn't holster my weapon, though, because fuck that.

"Where's the cash? If Vance sold everything he stole from Winter, you should know, right?" I stomped over to Piers, but I

was very aware of Winter watching my every move, and I didn't want him to be afraid of me after everything that had happened to him recently. I reined in the urge to punch this weasel in the face. He cringed away from me when I got closer, and my heart twisted. He was still sitting on the bed naked, except for a blanket. Whatever Vance was to Piers, it looked like he'd been with him when Winter bumbled in, and now Vance was dead. I patted his shoulder instead of smacking him. He blinked at me, still scared. I had no doubt I was the villain in his mind.

“Will you shoot me if I say I don't know where he put the money?” Piers asked in a small voice. “Vance didn't trust me with things like that. He didn't trust me at all.”

“What do you know?” I growled, guilt clobbering me upside the head. *Trust*. Vance didn't trust the boy he fucked. I hadn't trusted Winter. Maybe, in the end, we'd been too fucking much alike. “Also, the police are downstairs in the lobby, so you're going to have to go down there and convince them to go away,” I said quickly to Winter over my shoulder. “You need to go douse your face in cold water. Get a bandage on that cut. Change your clothes. Hurry!”

“Oh shit,” he gasped out, touching his red splotchy cheeks lightly with his fingertips.

Piers sat up straighter when I gestured with the gun for him to start talking. “Uh. . . . Well, there definitely was cash. There were three duffel bags and a laptop. Some of the money was converted into crypto and stored on a computer.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” I grumbled. Was this really our fucking lives right now? Why couldn't anything be simple? “You might as well be speaking gibberish, kid. I don't know anything about computers.”

Piers smiled and his eyes crinkled in the corners, which made him seem a little more innocent and made me feel less like rearranging the face someone had already punched too many times. “I do. If you find it, I can help you get the crypto turned back into cash.” He winced when I raised my hand, but I only put the gun back in my holster.

“You’re sure you can do that?”

He nodded immediately.

“You better be. But we have to find the money and the laptop first?”

“Yes, sir,” he whispered, then rubbed the back of his hand across his nose as he sniffed.

“You don’t know if it’s in this building somewhere or where he stashed it?” I could already feel a headache starting behind my eyes.

Piers curled forward and his shoulders shrank as if he was worried I would hit him, and that had me officially feeling like a prick.

“Stop that,” I snapped and took a step back. “If I was going to hurt you, I would’ve shot you already.”

Winter hustled over to the bed and already looked better. He’d cleaned up a bit and had a large Band-Aid covering the gash on his temple, which had been bleeding when I arrived, and he wore a clean black sweater and pants. “I don’t have a lot of time. You’re really going to help me?”

Piers shrugged. “Yes. I didn’t like what Vance was doing to you. Usually, he steals money from people who were taking it from others first, and I didn’t care too much about robbing assholes like that blind, but you weren’t doing anything wrong,” he said softly. I hated it when Winter darted in to hug Piers before he spun and headed off.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Cops!” he called. “Remember?”

Fuck, I hadn’t. I shifted and my right leg throbbed. “Stop in the bathroom and check yourself in the mirror again. Look for blood.”

“Okay!” he said from the other room.

I went over to the bed and Piers kept a good eye on me as I picked up the gun, which I assumed he’d used to shoot Vance. With the way he was crumpled on the floor on his front, there

was no way Winter had done it, and besides, Winter wasn't the type of guy to squeeze a trigger. I tucked this gun in my waistband, too. Damn it, I had too many weapons to keep track of while working, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"I'm sorry," Piers mumbled. He stared at Vance's gun until my suit coat fell and covered the flashy handle.

"Get dressed." I didn't want to turn my back on him, but I also didn't like the idea of staring at him while he put his clothes on, so in the end, I went out into the other room and grabbed the fancy purple rug I'd spotted on the way in. I dragged it into the bedroom, and Piers was just pulling a red T-shirt over his head. It was chilly in the room and he rubbed his hands over his arms. "Don't you have anything heavier than that?"

He shrugged and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "No."

"Borrow something from Winter, then come help me with Vance."

Wide eyed, he nodded, then rushed over to the rack of clothing along the wall. He snagged a black sweater almost exactly like the one Winter was wearing and pulled it on. I shook my head. Vance had found that kid somewhere, and he'd trained him to listen to orders. I wasn't sure he would be okay on his own. This was just another fucking problem that I would have to deal with before I felt okay letting the situation go. I sighed.

"Why did Vance hate you?" Piers asked.

I turned to look at him and laughed. "You want the real reason or the bullshit one I tell myself?"

"Um. . . ." The confused glance he gave me was almost painful.

I shrugged. "I'll tell you what I really think happened. He was pissed off he couldn't pull one over on me." Swallowing hard, I stared at the wall instead of the corpse. "About twelve years ago we were assigned together on the police force in

Chicago. We worked the larceny cases that were worth big bucks because we were good at our jobs. Rich people complained a lot and wanted to get their fancy shit back when someone made off with it. For two years we worked side by side. Then one night I was staking out a well-off neighborhood that kept getting hit by a cat burglar who had really good taste in jewelry. Guess who I saw sneaking into a house?”

“Vance?” Piers supplied helpfully.

I snorted. “Vance. We got into it. We’d been dating for about a year. He paid for a lot of nice things for us and said it was out of an inheritance. I’d believed him and never checked into it. I said I couldn’t live with someone who lied to me. He said that if I couldn’t live with him—”

“You wouldn’t live at all?” Piers asked with a wince, touching his nose.

“What stopped him from killing you?” I asked, tilting my head back so he could see my scar.

Piers shrugged. “I said I would stay and apologized. I’ve been apologizing for nine months, but it’s never enough.”

I stared at Vance’s blood-stained body and felt like shit. I’d imagined killing him over and over again throughout the years, but I supposed there was some sort of justice in the lover he’d been torturing shooting him, and with the haunted expression on Piers’s face as he stared at Vance along with me, I had no doubt their relationship had been toxic as fuck.

Piers sniffed and wiped at his face with the back of his hand.

“I’ll help you get on your feet, kid. I promise.”

He smiled. “I’m twenty-five. I’m not a kid. I should’ve known better.”

I shrugged. “Shouldn’t we all? Don’t be proud here.”

He nodded.

I thumped his arm lightly. My leg throbbed as I bent down to grab Vance’s shoulders, and Piers picked up his feet. The

kid was pretty good at helping me position Vance on the carpet and seemed to have a method in mind when rolling it up.

This wasn't his first body disposal, and since it wasn't mine, either, I kept my mouth shut. When we were done, I was beginning to worry because Winter wasn't back from his chitchat with the cops yet. Piers heaved a sigh and crossed his arms over his chest, looking at me again.

“Why do you want to help me?”

I gestured at the carpet roll. “You just did something for me, and I don't mean helping me lug a piece of rotting meat around. I'm not sure I could've done it. Killed him. I wanted to do it. I meant to do it. But. . . I loved him once.”

Piers slipped his hand under his borrowed sweater and scratched at his belly. Was there dried cum there that Vance had fucked out of him earlier? “I never loved him. He didn't give me a chance.” He bent and rested his hand on the carpet roll and closed his eyes. Maybe he was praying, which was also something I would never have been able to do, so I turned my back and gave Piers as much privacy as I was willing to allow. Until that money was found, he was going to stay somewhere I could keep an eye on him.

There was always the chance he'd been perfectly content with Vance, but he would be even happier with a couple million dollars all to his lonesome. He'd just freed himself up to run if he had the opportunity to recover the hidden money.

While we waited for Winter to come back, I considered dropping Piers off at a fleabag motel somewhere and getting a couple of guys to help me tail him, but he went over and sat on the bed, doing a good job of acting sad. I started second-guessing myself.

Sighing, I pulled my phone out and called the Courtesan.

“Hello, this is the Courtesan Hotel. How may I assist you?” The snippy voice that smacked at my ear belonged to Darcy Winters, and I was glad. I didn't have time to play twenty questions right now.

“Need a hand. It's RJ.”

He sighed and it was the type of sound that came all the way from his cold, barely beating heart. A lot of people didn't like Darcy, but I thought he came by that attitude honestly. "What type of assistance do you need, sir?"

"Little bit of a cleanup."

He hummed and his irritation was clear in the tone. "We don't normally provide that service outside the hotel, sir," he said waspily.

"Ask your mother. She'll okay it. This is something that she has a personal interest in."

He huffed. "Fine, sir. We do aim to go above and beyond here at the Courtesan. Address?"

I gave him the street and building number for Beaulieu, nothing more, nothing less.

"When the man arrives who takes care of this type of *bothersome request* for us, please excuse his appearance. He doesn't always dress professionally. I would not choose to annoy or threaten him in any capacity, but please, feel free to test his patience." Darcy hung up without a goodbye, and I contemplated that last bit of zing from him.

I swung around to Piers. Shit, I had to trust him to stay put for a few minutes. "If you run away, you won't like what I do."

He nodded frantically.

"Damn it." I didn't want to leave him, but I also didn't want to give him a chance to do something stupid in front of the police. In the end, I made my peace with leaving Piers for a few minutes.

I snuck downstairs along the back stairwell and went out the door and around to the front of the building in time to see Winter walking out of the lobby door while laughing with two cops. I strolled closer and poked around on my phone so I wouldn't look like I was staring.

"You see, it was quite a shock coming in to all the jewelry missing, but the deliveries had been made and one of my

employees forgot to document the transactions. I'm so sorry for panicking and calling you." Winter beamed at a tall cop who was probably twenty years younger than me and closer to his age.

I fucking hated it. The man was built with sharp features that couldn't be called anything except handsome. Jealousy reared its ugly head and I wanted to go over there and snatch Winter away from the man.

"It was no trouble at all, Mr. Janvier. It's so wild that the elevator falling sounded like a gunshot. I've never seen a mess like that. You're lucky you weren't on it. Make sure you contact Vane Elwood and let him know that happened. I would say it's worth bothering him at city hall. Call me, personally, anytime you have any other issues." The cop flashed him a smile and shook his hand. The asshole held on to Winter too long and didn't let go until his partner whapped him on the back as he went to get behind the wheel, and then the cop flirting with my boy finally got into the police cruiser, and they drove off. I wasted no time stomping over to glare after the black-and-white.

Winter startled when he noticed me but smiled. "What's that look for?"

"I didn't like him touching you." I frowned.

Winter snorted and tipped his head back, his white-blond hair gleaming in the sunlight, and there was a small smile on his lips. "He shook my hand."

"He *held* your hand." I grabbed his wrist and laid a kiss on his palm, marking my territory.

Winter drew his arm away and curled his fingers over the spot where my lips had been, and that gave me a warm swirly feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Men sometimes like to do that with me. Should I tell them no from now on? Tell them I have a boyfriend who would be angry if he saw me making time with another man? Should I say, *my Daddy says I'm not allowed to be flirted with?*" he murmured, eyebrows dancing upward.

“Brat.”

He smiled, but it wilted as a shiny black van with a couple of dents in it, which no one had bothered to pop out, pulled to a stop at the curb. A short man dressed in black leather from head to toe got out. He had burnt orange tipped bangs and brilliant blue eyes lined in black that he used to stare all the way into my soul when he met my gaze.

“Are you searching for a solution to a particular problem?” he asked with a toothy grin.

“You’re the man the Courtesan Hotel sent?”

He fluttered his eyelashes and stepped closer. “No one sends me anywhere. I’m Undertaker.” He stuck out his hand, and I couldn’t do anything else except shake it. Winter’s lips twitched toward a smile as he stared pointedly at where I touched this man, and I ignored it. He shook his head at me as soon as I let go of Undertaker.

“Is that your real name? I only ask because my name is Winter and it’s unusual, but I can’t see a parent naming someone Undertaker.” Winter blinked at him. “I like it. Good job.”

Undertaker tilted his head and put a hand on his hip, then a softer smile spread across his lips. “My real name is Tim. Now —” He rubbed his hands together and the silver spikes on his leather bracelets glinted. “—let’s see the mess.”

We walked around the building and back upstairs without a single complaint from Undertaker. He mumbled to himself, but mostly seemed to be interested in the high-rise, his curious gaze darting around. As soon as we reached Winter’s bedroom, Undertaker skirted the perimeter, taking in all the details. Winter motioned Piers over at our side, and we watched Undertaker stare all around like he might be quizzed on what he saw later.

“Are you okay?” Piers asked Winter.

“I got rid of the cops, if that’s what you mean,” he said with a sigh. “I would be better if we found my money.” He nudged my arm with his shoulder.

I shifted the wrong way and hissed at the pain that jolted through my body from my leg. He bumped me again, and I realized it was on purpose, so I put my arm around him. “How much are you willing to pay to get the money back?” I asked.

Winter frowned at me. “I don’t understand.”

“I could probably round up some men to look for your cash, but they would want a finder’s fee.”

“Finder’s fee?” Undertaker whirled around to stare at me and casually paced closer, hips rolling. “Your little bird lost something?” He smiled at Winter, and I couldn’t say why, but I hated it. He snickered when I took a step back with him at my side. “I know a whole club full of men who would be overjoyed to look for missing money, if they were going to get a percentage.” He flashed me a dangerous smile and his pointy canines were off-putting. “I’m a King. I don’t usually wear my club colors when I’m doing this sort of job.” He nodded at the carpet.

“You belong to a biker gang?” Winter asked, sounding scandalized. He raised his hand to his mouth and glanced at me. My heart swelled as he leaned even closer to me. Jesus, it was no wonder Vance had taken advantage of him. I pressed a kiss to his uninjured temple. I would keep him safe from now on.

Undertaker laughed at him—or maybe me; I wasn’t sure which. “You’ve got a body in here and you can still sound like that? It didn’t float down dead onto your floor. The corpse fairy didn’t give it to you as a gift.” Undertaker waggled his eyebrows and stepped closer. He was fast and booped Winter on the nose, then danced out of reach before I could shove him away.

“Fuck,” I snarled.

“Well, I didn’t kill him,” Winter said, frowning.

Undertaker stared between me and Piers, then seemed to decide I’d been the one to pull the trigger by the way he nodded at me, which was fine, so I stepped forward, putting Piers and Winter behind me.

“How much would the Kings want?” I asked.

“What would ten percent be?” He tongued the corner of his mouth while he stared at me.

“A tax write-off,” Winter declared.

Undertaker pointed at him with raised eyebrows. “I like that. But how much?”

“Probably about four hundred thousand. Maybe give or take twenty or thirty. I’m not completely certain because he wasn’t selling things for the price I would’ve. He cleaned out my whole inventory. Part of what we’re looking for would be a laptop that we would have to mess around with to get the rest of the money, but I would be totally fair. Could you ask the man who finds it to sign off as a consultant for Beaulieu, my jewelry shop? I can write off a fee like that. Maybe I could design something for the Kings to make it seem legitimate. A necklace or—”

“Ring. The Kings should have rings. I like that. Big ones that would fucking hurt if you punched someone when you were wearing it.” Undertaker snorted and pulled out his cell phone. “You’re going to talk to a man named Aaron. Tell him everything you told me and exactly what we’re looking for.”

“I can do that,” Piers said as Winter and I glanced at him.

“It’s a plan then,” I grumbled, not exactly loving this but unable to turn down the help. New Gothenburg was a big city for three men to search, and we might never find Winter’s money alone.

Undertaker blew Piers a kiss before he began to talk softly into the phone with his back toward us.

“Now what?” Winter asked with a pout firmly on his pink lips.

“We can look, but like most work taking apart a crime, we wait. A case like this always takes time.”

Winter groaned, and I pulled him tight against my side again, unwilling to let him go.

Nerves worse than the time I'd held a live hand grenade danced through my stomach as I knocked on the door of the room I'd shared with Winter while I was resting up from my bullet wound, which was still hurting a lot. I tried not to think about my leg. I'd gone home to give Winter space after we'd enlisted the Kings to search for his cash, but it had been two days, and no one had called yet.

Which meant I didn't have a reason to talk to Winter, but I missed him.

And, since I was a dumbass who still didn't have his phone number, I'd gone the old-fashioned route and decided to visit him. I knocked again, then stood there holding my breath.

Winter opened the door and blinked up at me with his pretty blue eyes. He looked the same as usual in a long-sleeved black shirt and black jeans, but that didn't take away from his beauty. I smiled at him.

"Did they find it?" he asked, grinning.

"No, but. . . ." I drew my hand from behind my back and gave him the red rose I'd brought with me.

He took the bloom and stared at it for a moment, then up at me again. "What is this?"

My hand tightened into a fist at my side. "An apology. I know you were mad at me. Before. About me not trusting you."

He smiled and glanced down at the rose, then trailed the petals against his soft cheek. I wasn't sure why, but that was one of the most perfect sights I'd ever seen.

I groaned as he danced the petals over his lips.

"I am angry. You don't trust me." He gave me a disdainful glance that made me want to give him the whole world and lie at his feet. "Where could we possibly go from here?"

I took the rose from him and brushed it over the tip of his nose. He smiled, and I handed it back. “Maybe I do trust you now.”

“Oh,” he said, but that one word was full of heat and something else. My cock chubbed at the way he stepped closer and brought the smell of crisp cologne with him.

“Get ready. I’m taking you out. Wear something I’ll want to rip off you.”

He smirked and glanced away from me, cheeks flushing pink. “You really want to take me out? On a date?”

I nodded.

“And you’re sorry?” He trailed the rose along my throat, and I had trouble swallowing.

“No. I’m not sorry that I didn’t trust you, but I’m ready to start with a fresh outlook. I hope you’ll write off what happened before as the old me, who was still hungry for revenge. I don’t think I can say I’m sorry for what I did then, because I wasn’t apologetic about it at the time, but I regret upsetting you.”

He spun the rose in his hand while focusing on it, as if it was a crystal ball that would give him all the answers. “All right. Wait here, Daddy,” he said, taking a step back and closing his door.

Chuckling, I hobbled to lean against the wall across from his door, then stuffed my hands in my black winter coat. The pain in my leg had me gritting my teeth for a second. I’d done too much earlier to get ready for this date, but I wasn’t sorry about it. Winter deserved the best. I put all my weight on my good leg. He was precious and beautiful, and by some miracle I hadn’t scared him off. Holy fuck, I was a lucky asshole.

Twenty minutes later the door opened, and I thought maybe he’d showered because the cologne he wore was different, more herbal, and reminded me of long nights in the mountains during snowstorms. I slid my gaze down his body and almost shoved him back into the room toward the bed. Black leather pants clung to his toned thighs. Stylish short

boots came up past his ankles and gave him an extra inch. The shirt under his black leather coat—which clung to him in ways the other one he'd worn hadn't—came up his neck in a stiff black collar, but when he moved just right in the light the material turned sheer and I could see his nipples and the shadow of his belly button. He smirked and zipped up his coat while he watched me with heat in his eyes.

“Yeah, I was right. You're a boy who wants to drive his Daddy crazy.” I stepped closer and pressed my lips to his soft cheek. I swore I could still smell a hint of the rose there. “You're beautiful, baby.”

Winter fumbled for my hand, and I took his. “Thanks, Daddy,” he murmured.

Because of my damned leg, I took the elevator while he walked down the grand staircase, and as we met up again, I ignored the way he kept eyeing up my limp as I walked because I wasn't about to let some stupid injury stop me from taking him out and doing things with him. I swung by the front desk and grabbed a red metal cooler that had been packed by the kitchen. The container was fairly large, and Winter had to let go of my hand so I could carry it out.

“What's this?” he asked with a laugh, slapping the side of the cooler.

“You'll see.” I winked at him, and he smiled as he followed me out the front doors. My replacement for the Roadster wasn't original—it was just a new car of the same model, only this time I'd gone with white. He sighed happily when he spotted it nearby.

“I love this.” He waved a hand at the Roadster.

“Yeah? I was a little worried about the dirt showing,” I said.

The valet saw me coming and opened the trunk for me. I set the cooler inside, then passed him a twenty with a nod. He'd kept the car idling so it would be warm for Winter, and I was happy to open the door and let him get settled.

“Where are we going?” Winter asked as soon as I got in the car and shut my door.

“You’ll see,” I said with a grin.

“Very mysterious. I wasn’t planning on being surprised today.” He tilted his head at me and smiled, a soft, pretty curve of his lips, and my heart leaped. I’d never seen him quite like this—relaxed. I didn’t know Winter well yet, but I wanted to learn everything about him, and I would do my best to make sure he was delighted with me every day, if it meant I would get the opportunity to spend time with him.

I sucked in a deep breath and started the Roadster forward. It had been so long since I’d made small talk that I’d almost forgotten how. “So. . . what did you do today?”

Winter grinned and bounced in his seat, one hand fluttering in my direction. “Since I’m staying at the Courtesan while the Kings and Mr. Arthur look for my money, I cleaned and organized all of Madam Winters’s jewelry! That woman has her own vault. My God, I’ve never seen a private collection like this. It is as big as Noah’s! She has antiques. She has. . . . It’s just stunning. I offered because I was bored, and she was happy to let me do it. I was even able to fix a few pieces for her that didn’t take real jewelers’ equipment. It was fun.” He continued to chat about the uneventful parts of his day, then moved on to how he’d run into a musician he’d made diamond studded guitar picks for in the hotel bar. All the while I drove through the darkness, which settled early this time of year.

“Why are we here?” Winter asked, leaning forward to check out Drummond’s Auto Service. The garage wasn’t large, and Keith Drummond usually threw in a free oil change when I brought the Roadster to him for service. I pulled up next to the wrecked black Roadster that I’d sold to Keith, rather than messing around with repairs.

“I left keys I need in the glove compartment, and I knew we would be driving past this place.” I grinned at Winter and hopped out, rushing over to the old Roadster. I opened the passenger door and leaned in, then quickly found the keys without much of a search. As I stood up, something poked at

my mind. I stared at my ruined car and frowned. My brain chugged along, some thought just out of reach that seemed important. I went over to the white Roadster and stared at the black one.

When I got in and closed the door, I spun toward Winter in my seat. “Was Vance’s Porsche parked near your building?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said, brow furrowing in thought. “Why?”

Frowning, I took out my phone and sent a text to Aaron Arthur, asking him to look for Vance’s Porsche. Since I didn’t know the license plate number, I told him it was silver and described the damage I’d done to it. He was the King we’d talked to about finding Winter’s money.

My phone vibrated in my hand.

Aaron Arthur: I’ll pass that info on.

Abrupt. To the point. I liked Arthur. Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I smiled at Winter. “Now we’re good to go.”

“Do you think my money is in Vance’s car?” Winter asked, eyes shining with hope.

I shrugged. “It’s just a hunch. It’s the only thing he had that he owned, right? He was sneaking around and living in your building while he worked his angle on you. So, if the cash isn’t in your building, and the Kings tore that place apart searching for it, where else might it be? Piers didn’t remember him ever sneaking off alone, and they were living together on the third floor.”

Winter smiled at me. “Well, I hope they find it. We should ask Piers how they got back to the building without the car.”

“Okay. Do you have his number?”

Winter nodded, and we both waited on pins and needles after he sent off a text. He sighed when his phone finally vibrated in his hand, then rolled his eyes. “He says that they took an Uber after they left the car. It wasn’t drivable with the

flat and they didn't have a replacement. Vance left it behind a building *somewhere*."

Laughing, I passed that info on to Arthur, and he sent me back a middle finger emoji.

The drive was quiet after that, and I snuck my hand over to snag Winter's and hold it tight. We took the highway near Lake Ontario to the western edge of New Gothenburg, and I turned the Roadster in to a small two-lane road that went past some nice cabins and vacation rentals along the lake. I kept going until we reached a dirt path that wasn't well maintained and finally brought the car to a stop in front of the Pine Point Lighthouse.

"Wow!" Winter said in delight. I'd strung a strand of Christmas lights around the wooden door in the base of the single brick tower that shot straight up toward the night sky. Snow clouds churned high above us and a few white flakes began to drift down. He laughed. "What is this?"

I shrugged and took both of his hands in mine. "I'm doing all right, but I'm not a rich man. I can't fly you across the world on the drop of a dime the way some guys could, but I thought I would show you something new and keep you on your toes." I winked at him.

He leaned across the console and hugged me. "I don't care about money."

"No? Then why do we have bikers tearing apart the city?" I kissed the shell of his ear.

He smacked my chest lightly. "I don't like getting screwed over, either," he said, narrowing his eyes. I got a thrill from the dangerous snarl that crossed his lips because it was fucking sexy. "Besides, if this all works out, I'll fly us somewhere nice because we deserve a vacation."

"Let's go." I got out, wincing at the blast of cold air that smacked my face, and went to the trunk to grab out the cooler.

"This is so pretty," he said as he followed me into the cold, then shut the car door while glancing upward to where more

holiday lights were strung around the upper windows of the lighthouse.

He smiled at me as I opened the wooden door and flipped on the light inside. The stone steps had been built in a spiral, and we went up, passing bare lightbulbs about every twenty feet. My right leg quickly began to ache, but I refused to rest or stop, and I was in pain by the time we reached the wooden platform at the very top. The round space was about twenty feet in diameter, with the large signal light right in the middle. A metal reflective collar insulated the unlit bulb to direct all the light out toward the lake once it was turned on. I set the cooler on the floor beside the simple square wooden table I'd set up earlier with a vase of red roses in the middle, which would allow us to look out at the lake while we ate. I'd brought the table here about a year ago, but I'd always been alone.

The pink and blue lights reflected on Winter's hair and made him beautiful as he walked around to stare out the windows. I felt ready to burst with pride at being here with someone so amazing.

I walked over and flipped the switch to turn on the beacon, and Winter clapped and cheered. The brilliant green light cut a shining path over the churning gray water directly in front of the lighthouse.

"Why is it green instead of white?" he asked, curiosity bright in his voice.

I shrugged. "For the holidays. It's just a plastic shield over the bulb." I limped over and turned on two space heaters so he would be able to take off his coat while we ate dinner.

Winter walked around looking at everything with interest. "Do you own this place?"

"Nah. I have no idea who it belongs to. I found it when I was out running when I first moved to New Gothenburg. It's not officially in use anymore. No one ever comes here, and no one has ever moved anything I brought to store here."

He smacked a hand over his mouth and laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Yep. Let’s eat,” I said, flipping open the cooler lid.

He came up and leaned against my side as I pulled out a container of chicken breasts and set it on the table. He stared up at me. “Is everything this exciting with you?”

“I try to keep it entertaining, baby,” I murmured.

He flushed and pressed a kiss to my cheek that sent my heart soaring. I’d worried that I’d messed up forever, and I was so glad he was giving me a second chance.

WINTER



“So, THAT’S THE STORY OF YOU AND VAN. OR VANCE, I guess?” I glanced at RJ. My eyes stung with tears that wanted to fall.

RJ nodded. “Yep.”

“Wow.”

The wind blew harder and the small metal deck we were sitting on that extended out from the top of the lighthouse tower swayed a tad more than I would’ve liked, but RJ held me close at his side with a strong arm. The blanket he’d wrapped around both of us was soft and warm, and the fuzzy fabric felt comforting. I almost wished I was naked so I could roll around on it. Not too far away, white-capped gray waves that reminded me of turtles slammed against the land, revealing the fact that they were far more deadly than they looked. I glanced over my shoulder to reassure myself that the window we’d walked out of, which was more like a door because it was on a hinge, was still open. My cheeks were cold, but I simply dragged the thick blanket up higher around my face.

Should I say anything about Vance? How much did it hurt to have someone you love try to kill you? I leaned harder against RJ. He didn’t seem like he wanted to rehash it all and discuss things to death, so I let it go. “This is breathtaking.”

“You’re breathtaking.” RJ gave me a squeeze.

We stared out at the water for a while longer, and the waves continued their endless trip toward land, blown by the

wind that ruffled my hair. Along the beach to my right, the beam of a flashlight caught the corner of my eye, and I turned to watch someone plodding along at a steady pace. “RJ?”

“Hmm?” He pressed a kiss below the scratch on my temple that had my belly warming, and I curled my fingers into his shirt and tugged at the fabric.

“Is that someone you were expecting?” I asked, nodding in the direction of the light.

“Shit on a shingle. No. Let’s book it.” He shot to his feet. The cold wind sliced through my leather coat and I shivered as he helped me to stand. I needed the hand because I was stiff from sitting in one place so long in the cold, even though we’d been wrapped up together. He urged me back inside the lighthouse first, then followed me in with the blanket over his arm. I huddled near one of the space heaters while he closed and locked the window we’d gone out through.

“Unplug those,” he said, pointing at my beautiful sources of warmth. With a sigh, I nodded.

RJ was very dour as we packed up the dishes and containers to go back to the Courtesan, and I caught his eye and stuck my tongue out at him. He chuckled. We hurried, but he was no longer acting like we were about to be gunned down for sneaking into an old building that didn’t belong to us, maybe because we were already in motion to flee. He flipped off the lever for the beacon, unplugged the holiday lights, and then we raced down the stairs together. At the bottom, he unplugged the lights around the door and turned off the rest, leaving us in darkness. We took out our phones to use them as flashlights while hustling to the car at top speed. My heart raced until we were back in the Roadster and on the road headed toward the Courtesan Hotel.

RJ held my hand as he drove, and we kept trading glances that had my blood heating. I looked away, feeling shy.

“Tell me where you see this thing between us going?” he asked quietly. The air in the car felt heavy as I sucked in a deep breath.

“I’m a romantic.” I squeezed his hand. “I don’t like to start things with someone I couldn’t fall in love with. If I can’t see a future with a man, I don’t let him get close.” I lifted his knuckles and rubbed my cheek against them.

RJ gave me a serious squint before focusing on the road again. “You’re deeper than I gave you credit for when I first met you. All I saw was a gorgeous blond. I didn’t realize you were so sweet and thoughtful.”

I shrugged, not sure how to respond or even if he wanted me to say anything. “How about you?”

He grunted. “I’ve fucked for the sake of it because I like to get my rocks off. I won’t lie, I sowed my wild oats. But I could see myself with you for a long time. This isn’t only about sex. If there wasn’t more to this, I never would’ve stuck my neck out for you.” He scowled.

“But it’s also a little about wanting me, I hope?” I grinned. “Would you come to my room tonight, Daddy?”

His expression cleared and he winked. “You’re perfect, boy.”

Smiling, I settled back into the seat. The trip to the Courtesan was smooth and comfortable with the heat blasting on me from the vents, and I was starting to feel very fond of the hotel when he pulled the Roadster up in front of the doors. Today someone had strung holiday lights around all the windows and put electric candles on the insides, which were lit. The view was as pretty as a Christmas card and I couldn’t help but smile.

When we walked inside, I spotted Piers hustling across the lobby from the white marble grand staircase to the bar with an empty tray. Someone had wound white holiday lights around all the decorative pillars, and they blinked happily; maybe it had been him. Madam Winters had said she would give him something to do when I’d told her about him, and he seemed to be settling into the job well. I wasn’t sure what exactly his official title happened to be here at the hotel, but from what I’d gathered, he did a lot of odd jobs for anyone who asked. Piers turned, and I waved at him.

He smiled and gave me a goofy bow before the bartender said something that snagged his attention.

“How can you be so nice to him?” RJ asked, although he didn’t sound upset, just confused.

“Piers was trapped in a bad situation and didn’t have the courage to get out of it for himself, but he found it to help me.” I clasped RJ’s hand and held on tight. “That counts for a lot.”

RJ didn’t say anything but held me close as we walked to the elevator together, then went inside. He stumbled a little and straightened, and I nudged him with my elbow because he kept trying to pretend his leg didn’t hurt at all. He probably thought I hadn’t noticed him limping here and there, and I assumed he didn’t want to take the stairs because he was still in pain. RJ rested his hand on the back of my neck and tickled the skin with his thumb. Since he was busy, I jabbed the button to take us to the second floor.

“That feels good.” I stepped closer to him as an electric shiver raced across my skin. He rubbed his thumb up under my ear and down to massage along my jawbone, which felt oddly good. “I don’t have anything here for, uh, sex, Daddy,” I murmured, glancing up at him.

“Good,” he said, and his tone was so self-satisfied that I had to chuckle.

“How is that good?”

“Daddies are supposed to take care of their boys. Everything we need will be in the room when we get back.” He winked at me.

My face heated. “So, someone at the Courtesan knows you’re planning to . . . be with me tonight?”

“They do,” he said as the elevator door opened, and we stepped out. I glanced back over my shoulder and my gut clenched for a moment. Because RJ was hurt, I’d been able to deal with the elevator. I didn’t think I would be able to stomach getting on one alone.

“What if I said no tonight?” I glanced up at him.

He smiled and tapped the tip of my nose. “I would respect it. But I don’t think you will.”

I snorted. “Cocky.”

“Yep.” He winked and dragged me in for a rough kiss that stole my breath and trapped me in time like we were in an hourglass on its side. I had no idea how long his mouth ate mine or when I got hard enough that I couldn’t stop myself from rubbing my wood against his thigh, but someone walked past in the hallway and slapped RJ on the shoulder.

“Take that pretty cabin boy to a room and have your way with him, sir,” he said. I frowned after the man dressed as a pirate who hurried away from us along the hall.

“Does he work here?”

RJ chuckled. “Yeah, his name’s Ephraim. Come on.” RJ backed off a bit, but we stared into each other’s eyes and all I could do was grin until my cheeks hurt.

“I’m so happy to be here with you tonight, Daddy. Everything you did was nice.”

He tickled my chin with his thumb. “What do you want tonight, boy?”

My body burned so hot that I was sure I was on fire and my head felt spacey as I crooked a finger at him. He leaned closer so I could put my lips right against his ear. “I can’t stop thinking about how Piers was tied up. He did like Van at one point, so I think early on he must’ve agreed to all that. What I saw was bad. I don’t think Piers wanted to be doing it anymore. And I feel terrible for him. But I can’t stop wondering what it would feel like to be restrained that way with someone I love. Daddy, I want to try it.”

RJ groaned and attacked my bottom lip, sucking on it. “I can do that with you, boy.”

I grabbed his waist and held on for dear life. “Is it wrong that seeing him in such a horrible position made me want to try it? I might not have thought about it without that moment. In a weird way, I keep thinking all this crap was almost worth it because that image in my mind is. . . . I don’t have words.

And at the time I was really upset and scared, but thinking back, there was something about the cuffs I liked. For me, not him. Fuck, I sound stupid.” Humiliation had my cheeks burning.

RJ tipped my chin up. “I don’t care if it is wrong.” His eyebrows flew high and some of my embarrassment vanished. “I want you to have anything you want or need from me, boy.”

RJ held out his elbow and I slid my hand around it. He walked me to my bedroom door. I was nervous as I used my key card to let us into the room, and the *click* of the door closing behind us was shockingly loud as it echoed. Someone had been in here like RJ had promised. The rose he’d brought me earlier was on the dresser in a clear glass vase. I’d left the flower with the stem in the bathroom sink because I hadn’t known what else to do with it. There was a silver tray of different fancy glass bottles full of liquids—were they oils? I couldn’t begin to guess at the contents. Crowded next to the glassware were a few brands of lube I recognized from trips down the aisle at the grocery store.

There was also a small box that reminded me of something for jewelry, so I went over to the tray and flipped up the top. I groaned because it was a selection of condoms in different sizes and brands. I picked up one square packet and the gold wrapper winked in the lamplight. “Do you need silicone?”

“No latex allergies here,” RJ said with a smile. “It just needs to fit.” He stared at me while unbuckling his belt. My throat went tight enough that I didn’t think a pea would slide down to my belly if I tried to swallow it. He drew the leather out of the loops. “You’re allowed to be a little twisted, Winter. Most of us are. I won’t judge you because you realized something punched your card while you were in a bad situation.” He stalked toward me. “Take your coat off, baby.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I breezed out, as if I was born saying the words, and a small smile kicked up the corner of his mouth. I shrugged off my leather coat and folded it in half before laying it on the dresser. He stepped forward and trailed his hand down the center of my chest, then circled his thumb around my right nipple. His touch felt good, but the thought that he

was caressing me there, where no one had really touched me, was almost more intoxicating than the stab of pleasure that flared to life in my groin. He played with the other nipple, and I wasn't sure what to do with my hands, so I ended up rubbing them over my abs as my cock swelled and throbbed and shoved at the front of my leather pants.

“You want to be tied down. I don't have anything cute like fuzzy cuffs here, nothing soft to cradle your sweet wrists, but I'm always willing to accommodate my baby,” he said, voice a low, warm rumble. He stepped back and slipped one side of his belt into the golden buckle and messed around with it for about a minute. When he was done, he had a circle of leather.

“Hands,” he said.

Frowning, I put my hands through the loop, and he was quick to pull on the tail of the belt. I was shocked as the leather tightened around my wrists. I tried to pull my hands apart and couldn't. He dragged my wrists higher into the air and backed me up against the wall beside the dresser. My shoulders were cold while my front was on meltdown alert. “What are you doing?”

“Don't ask Daddy questions while he's working, baby,” RJ murmured, then leaned down and kissed my neck.

I moaned as he sucked on a spot near my Adam's apple. My cock was struggling to get out of my pants, but I couldn't do anything. I tugged lightly on my arms, and he held them in place.

With a grin he led me over to the bed, and I was confused, but he unbuckled my belt. I moaned at the sensation of him pulling the leather out of the loops because it jostled my pants and made me painfully aware of my hard cock. He looped the leather around one of the sturdy wooden headboard supports.

“You're doing such a good job being patient,” he said, then scooped me up into his arms like I was air.

“Shit,” I said and laughed, clutching at his shoulder.

He shook his head with a smile as he took me the few steps to the bed and positioned me with my hands toward my belt. I

was diagonal across the mattress. I glanced up but couldn't tell what he was doing with the restraints. When he was done, my makeshift cuffs were secured to the headboard. I tugged and my hands weren't going anywhere. Heat rushed through my body and I arched my hips at the sensation. I whimpered, and RJ stared down at me the same way he'd looked at his plate before we started eating earlier—he was starving.

RJ unbuckled my boots and pulled them off, which was unexpectedly sensual. I quivered as he ran his hands up the front of my legs and over my hips. I'd chosen my sheer shirt to tease him, but I wasn't ready for it when he leaned down and latched onto my nipple through the fabric. The sensation was odd and good at the same time. He used his teeth to tease my nip and tugged at the cloth, and I writhed on the bed, not able to get any friction on my throbbing cock.

“Daddy, please,” I moaned. I'd thought our first time together was magic, but this was going to kill me if he kept doing it.

“Patience, boy,” he said, then moved to kiss my other nipple. He slid my shirt up until it bunched under my chin, then sucked on my pec. Everything was more intense without the fabric in the way, and I bucked, trying and failing to rub against him. He put both hands on my hips and held me down while he flicked the tip of his tongue over my nip. All I could think about was my cock.

It was so. Fucking. Stiff.

“You like that? I can't tell. I better do it some more.” His breath on my damp skin made me tug harder on the cuffs.

“Please, Daddy, fuck me.”

“Daddy's not ready for that.” He kissed the center of my chest. “Good boys are patient.”

I yanked on the cuffs until my wrists ached but couldn't do anything to get free. I had no idea how long he tortured my nips, but by the time he unbuttoned my pants the scratch on my temple burned because sweat was running down my

forehead. My entire body felt like it began and ended on the pulsing tip of my cock.

“Yes, yes, thank you,” I sobbed out as he peeled the leather down my legs and off me. He didn’t touch my cock. It was better being in my briefs without the pants, but I couldn’t do anything at all to get any relief, and the knowledge that I would have to wait for RJ, wait for my Daddy, had me on edge and oddly calm, all at the same time. There was a large damp spot on the front of my briefs and I could feel it cooling. The maddening sensation made me want to rub against something even more.

“You’re fucking gorgeous. Christ,” RJ murmured, staring down at me. He got off the bed and groaned while scratching his fingers through his short stubble.

“No, don’t go away.”

“I’m getting what we need,” he said, voice soothing.

My stomach muscles clenched as I watched him walk away toward the dresser, and a harsh pulse of pleasure sank into my groin while I tugged on the cuffs. Shocked, I whimpered.

“Daddy, what if I come from being tied up?”

He turned to stare at me and crossed his arms. “I’ll have to do it every day to get you used to it. Desensitize you.” He lifted one eyebrow.

A ragged noise escaped me that was somewhere between a moan and a yell as he gave me that stern glare. “Every day?”

He leaned on the dresser and watched me as I struggled against the leather, and I couldn’t stop rocking my hips. Pressure was building at the base of my spine and my cock was pulsing and my balls felt like they were ready to bust and dump cum everywhere.

“Daddy,” I moaned.

“Are you in pain? If you’re in pain, say diamonds. That’s your safe word.”

“No, Daddy.” I bit my lip and all I could think about was the feel of the leather and how he was over there, and I was here on the bed *because this was where he wanted me to be*. I was doing this for *his* pleasure. I gasped and shook as he slid his hand down his front and squeezed the bulge waiting there to fuck me. Pleasure rolled through me like a tsunami and I arched my hips, squeezing my eyes shut. I was shocked as I began to come, and my briefs got hot and sticky as I pumped load after load of jizz into them. I lay there, gasping and stunned. I blinked my eyes open and stared at the lamp next to the bed until there were stars in my eyes.

He chuckled, an evil, vicious, perfect sound that sent shivers racing over my skin. My cock had gone down a little, but I was still harder than I’d ever been in my life, and my nipples felt like pebbles stuck on my chest after the way he’d teased them.

“Did that feel good, baby?” Daddy came toward the bed. “You were a bad boy just now, Winter.”

I shook my head. “No, please, I want to be your good boy. I’ll do anything.” I felt weirdly desperate as I yanked on the cuffs.

He hummed and tossed the lube and a condom on the bed next to me. I trembled as he tugged down my briefs, then tossed the ruined underwear before crawling onto the bed. I spread my thighs, ready for him to do literally anything to me, but I squeezed my eyes closed when he bent and sucked on my cock. I whimpered and strained against the cuffs.

After the way I’d blown my load, I was too sensitive. His lips were pure fire, wonderful and awful, as he sucked along my shaft, then my cockhead. I thrashed through the overwhelming throbbing the suction of his hot mouth caused for a few minutes until I was just as hard as before I’d gotten off. My cock pointed toward my chin as I attempted to sit up and see what he was doing while still tied down to the bed. He pushed me flat with a firm hand on my chest.

“You’re lucky Daddy loves seeing you feel good or you would be in a lot of trouble. Next time you come without

permission while we're playing like this, Daddy won't let you come again until the next day. Is that clear?"

My cock throbbed so hard I almost fucked myself over and lost it again. "How would you keep me from coming, Daddy?"

He grinned. "We'll talk about it later. Right now—" He took off his winter coat and tossed it on the floor. The suit coat went next. His eyes burned with intensity while he lowered his zipper and pulled his thick cock out, and I was right back on the edge again, fighting the cuffs. He was fucking sexy in a white dress shirt and suit pants with his hard-on sticking out, ready to fuck into me. He opened the condom and unrolled it down his shaft while I watched and spread my legs wider for him.

"You felt so good the other night, Daddy. I loved it. I loved it so much."

"Daddy loved it, too, baby," he said, flashing me a warm smile. I bit my lip and wanted to help him as he slathered lube on his cock, but all I could do was wriggle my fingers.

"This would be easier if you were on your belly, boy, but Daddy wants to see your pretty face." He leaned down and kissed me, his lips a harsh takeover of my body. I gasped when he slid his left arm under my thigh and moved it up onto his shoulder, and then he slipped his fingers between my asscheeks. The lube was warm by the time he worked it into my body, and unlike the first night, he didn't tease my hole very long before he slid his other arm under my leg and lifted me in the air.

RJ didn't fuck me, so much as move me around and ease me onto his cock. He felt like a tree trunk going into my ass because his cockhead was so wide, but I took deep breaths and tried to relax. The way he filled my body blew my mind as he strained and gritted his teeth, moving me on his dick. The few brain cells I had available for something other than *oohing* and *aahing* over the way he was pinging my P-spot, allowed me to think that maybe he was fucking me this way to save his leg from getting bumped around. But then he was moving me faster and drilling perfectly into my hole.

All I could do was feel.

“Love this.” I looked down and could see the root of his cock because of the angle he had me tilted. His pants were open, and the cloth framing the action happening between us was a reminder that we were doing something dirty and so very right. He growled and dropped me onto the bed, covering my body with his, and the second he shoved his tongue into my mouth and fucked my lips with it, like his dick was filling my ass, my body flashed hotter than a bolt of lightning. Everything in me tensed. For a few seconds I couldn’t breathe. I tugged hard on the cuffs.

“Daddy, it’s too good.” I sobbed.

“Come on my cock, boy,” he growled out, smashing our bodies together faster. My toes curled and I listened to my Daddy. My balls drew up and a bubble of heat burst in my stomach as my cockhead tingled and electric fire slashed out through me. He fucked the cum out of my balls, and I pumped a sticky puddle onto my belly.

RJ groaned and grasped my hips hard. It hurt a bit, but I didn’t care.

“Please, Daddy. Fill me up, Daddy,” I whispered.

“Fuck, Winter,” he snarled, then covered my mouth with his as his cock swelled bigger and harder in my ass. I could feel him twitching inside me and his fingers on my hips tensed and relaxed in the same mesmerizing tempo. Minutes danced by in a haze. His lips softened on my mouth and he carefully pulled out of me.

“Oh, baby boy, you’re so precious,” he said, brushing my hair off my forehead. “Fuck, Winter, you’re everything.”

Smiling, I jerked on the makeshift cuffs, but I was actually disappointed when he removed them from around my wrists. He dragged me firmly against his chest. I felt weird—good and sad, all at the same time.

“What’s wrong?” RJ kissed my cheek.

“I loved that.” I smiled at him.

“Good.”

“I wanted you to put your cum in me,” I said. My cheeks burned.

He kissed my forehead. “There’s no hurry.”

“Should I like being tied up, Daddy?”

RJ ran his thumb along my cheek and studied my face. “We only have to make ourselves happy. We didn’t hurt anyone. You’re the most beautiful boy when you’re coming.”

I held on to him as hard as I could and never wanted to let go.



THERE WAS A LIGHT RAPPING ON THE DOOR. THE ROOM WAS dark when my eyes snapped open, and I fumbled for my gun and grabbed it, hissing as I sat up.

“What’s going on?” Winter asked, voice a tired slur.

“It’s okay, baby. Daddy’s gonna check. You’re safe.”

Winter grumbled under his breath and rolled over.

I smiled and turned on the lamp next to the bed. Pain stabbed my right calf and I glanced down at the thick white bandage that didn’t let me see the wound still giving me hell. I pulled on my boxers, then walked toward the door while holding in a string of swear words, limping to save some pain for later. I should’ve changed the bandage last night, but I hadn’t gone home. With a quick check of the windows, it hit me that it was still dark. A glance at my watch let me know it was a little after five in the morning.

Dread settled in my gut as I opened the door. Nothing good happened this early in the damned morning. Piers stood on the other side. He stared up at me with brown eyes full of fear and I felt like an asshole as his gaze darted to the gun in my hand.

“What?”

He flinched and stared at his feet. “Madam Winters said she received a call from the Kings. They tried to reach you, but your phone must be on silent. She sent me here. Please don’t shoot me.”

I grunted. “I’ll think about letting you live.”

He snuck a peek at my face, and I officially wished I was less of a fuck because his wide eyes were scared.

“I’m not gonna hurt you or I would’ve already. And? What else?”

“They want you to go to this address. I think they found Van’s Porsche,” he said quietly and shoved a piece of stationary with silver snowflakes lining the edges in my direction. I stared down at the flowing script on the paper and took it from him. The location was outside of town. I glanced up at him.

“Get coffee together for all of us. You’re coming, too.”

He grinned and nodded, hustling off. Someone had given him one of the hotel uniforms and the clothing fit him nicely. I had to wonder if Madam Winters had thought it was funny to dress him that way after the trouble he’d caused or if he’d simply been given one as an employee.

“The Kings might have found something?” Winter asked, sitting up on the bed. His white hair gleamed in the low light and I couldn’t keep my eyes off his slim chest or pink nipples. He made my mouth water without trying. “Daddy? Did you hear me?” He blinked his big blue eyes like a sleepy kitten. I could only stare for a moment. He was naked under the blankets that fell around his body and the curve of his hip stuck out. He was the embodiment of temptation.

“Don’t get your hopes up, baby.”

He nodded, but by the smile he flashed I already knew his expectations were floating around Neptune. “Do you think anyone will mind if I take a quick shower?” he asked, hopping out of bed to rush toward the bathroom. The eyeful I got of his cock and round, touchable ass as he sped away had me wanting to follow him and fuck him under the hot, steamy water.

“I don’t care if they do. You do whatever you want, sunshine. You deserve it.”

He laughed from the bathroom and the pleasant sound echoed. “What will you do if they’re mad at me, Daddy?”

The water began to splash against tiles in the other room and enticed me closer. I went to lean my shoulder against the doorjamb. The smoky glass shower door didn't give me a clear view of Winter's profile, only a tease, but that delicious glimpse had me wishing I could throw him back on the bed. "They'll get one look at my ugly face and shut their traps."

"Daddy, you're not ugly," he said with a laugh.

My body warmed and it was a shock to feel good. I hadn't given two shits about the scar on my neck, or at least, I hadn't thought I'd cared, but maybe part of me needed to know Winter found me as attractive as I did him.

"Are you going to shower with me, Daddy?" Winter asked as the scent of something floral hit the air, maybe shampoo.

"No. Not right now," I said, then moved off to get dressed.

Winter talked the entire time he got ready, and it was nice because he mostly didn't need a lot of input from me. Being near him was like having a pretty canary that sang and all I needed to do to make him happy was grunt yes or no occasionally. Usually a man would be irritated with me by now.

"Don't wear anything like you did last night," I growled out as he started digging through the dresser drawers to find a shirt. Plenty of his clothes had been brought over, so he had to be searching for something in particular.

He laughed and glanced over his shoulder at me. "I wasn't planning on it. It's too cold out." He dragged a long-sleeved black sweater out of a drawer and put it on, and while the V-neck made me want to devour his soft skin down to the point, coupled with black jeans, it was a mostly conservative outfit. I walked over and kissed his forehead. "I don't want you to tease anyone but me with your clothes." I traced my finger along his left collar bone, across his chest, and then tapped the other one.

"Yes, Daddy," he said with a smirk. "I won't."

We both threw on coats, then left the room, and Piers met us at the front desk. There were three cardboard travel cups of

coffee lined up along the edge of the sign-in spot. Darcy would have a fit about cups on the desk if he was here. I was grateful to snag a coffee and sucked down the black brew.

With a sigh, I dragged out my phone and made a call. It took some time to arrange one of the Courtesan's cars—I couldn't take three people in the Roadster—and about fifteen minutes later we were able to get on the road in a red Audi, with the cleanest black leather interior I'd ever seen outside of a sales lot.

“Other than the address you gave me, do you know anything about what we're walking into?” I asked Piers.

He glanced up, and I stared at him in the rearview mirror. “No. I wasn't told anything else. Sorry,” he mumbled.

“It's okay,” Winter was fast to say, turning around in his seat to look at Piers. “You're doing a great job.”

I wanted to roll my eyes because I couldn't understand how Winter could forgive and forget so easily, but when he flashed me a tight smile, I thought maybe he hadn't let everything go, he was just trying to be nice. That made me like him even more.

I drove the Audi out of town, and about a half hour, maybe a little more, passed as I navigated the snowy roads.

“Winter, put this address in your phone,” I said, conceding I wasn't entirely certain where we needed to go, even though I'd been all around this area. I handed him the sheet of paper from my pocket.

A couple of minutes passed, then he said, “According to Google, we need to turn on the right up here. Look at all those pine trees. Aren't they beautiful?” Winter took a sip of his coffee and gazed curiously ahead of us. I drove along a lane that ended at a large A-frame house. The windows on the first floor were lit up, but there were three bikes parked around the open door to a professional-sized garage, so that's where I went. I stopped the Audi, and Winter was out of his seat like a shot. Cursing, I went after him and Piers hopped out, too.

A tall, muscular man covered in tattoos stood near one of the bikes in a black leather coat with a Kings of Men patch on the shoulder, and Winter went directly toward him with his hand out. I growled and closed in on him, but the biker only shook Winter's hand.

"Thank you so much for helping me," Winter gushed.

The big man didn't smile, but he nodded, and I noticed a skull tattoo with glowing red eyes on his neck. "The Kings always love a good time. Not often we get a treasure hunt."

Winter groaned, and a tiny smile flashed across the man's face as he pointed toward the garage. "Go talk to Undertaker."

"Thanks." I came to a stop at Winter's side. "I've seen you around the Courtesan once or twice when you had to talk to Madam Winters. I'm RJ."

"Reaper," he said.

I snorted because it was fitting, then hooked my arm around Winter's waist and led him toward the open garage door. Piers trailed along behind us, shivering because he wasn't wearing a coat, and I felt bad for him, but I had one boy to wrangle and didn't need two. Guilt ate at me anyway, and I stripped off my winter coat and tossed it at him. He nearly spilled his coffee but gave me a grateful smile.

"Oh my God, that hearse reminds me of the Addams family!" Winter had a hand in his hair and stood gawking. Along the wall to our right sat a beautiful long black car, a stately vehicle that gleamed with perfection. It was no wonder the rolled wheel wells and boxy design had snagged his attention.

"It belonged to my grandfather," Undertaker said, coming around the back of the Porsche. The pride in his tone was clear. I was surprised because he wore a pair of black suit pants and he'd stripped down to a white undershirt, which was smudged with grease and dirt. His makeup was missing, and his hair was dark and normal, too, nothing like the way he'd looked when we'd first met him. "It's a classic. Isn't she a beauty? My aunt wanted me to sell it, and I told her if I got rid

of every last thing I owned, including my bikes—” He pointed at a row of six motorcycles that were not standard and probably cost more than my house. “—I would keep that car.” He grinned at Winter.

“I hate to ask,” Winter said, a pout taking over his face that made me curl my arm across his shoulders. “Please, please, please tell me that you found my money.”

Undertaker smirked. “Well, actually, Reaper found the car. It was impounded. It took some finesse to get it out of there, but we managed, just for you.” He reached out and tapped Winter’s chin, staring at me while he did it.

“Are you trying to piss me off?” I asked.

He chuckled and his eyes gleamed with delight. “Yeah, actually. It’s fun, too.” He blasted me with a wide smile that showed off his pointy canines. “Anyway, Reaper said he would split the cash with me because he found the car, but *I* found the money. He thought it was a dead end. Come on.”

Undertaker waved at us, and we followed him to the trunk of the Porsche, which was empty. “It’s actually clever. I was like, where would I hide money in a car like this?” He lifted the carpeting and tossed it out. “Nothing here, right? You probably thought the same thing I did, that there might be a hidden compartment, but there’s no welding marks or seams.” He knocked on the trunk floor. “Solid, right?”

“Okay. I wouldn’t have thought anything, really. I make jewelry.” Winter grinned at Undertaker.

“Well, little magpie—” He waggled his eyebrows. “—let me show you something special, then.” He walked around and opened the driver-side door. I was shocked when he peeled down the front cover of the driver’s seat. The leather folded over.

“It shouldn’t do that!” Winter shouted and slapped my arm.

“Nope,” I said, then sipped my coffee again.

There was a layer of black plastic with a zipper around it underneath the leather. Undertaker pulled the zipper down

with a dramatic sweep of his arm, and once the plastic fell away, Winter moaned and it sounded almost sexual. Inside were neatly wrapped stacks of cash.

“I didn’t take the money out to count it yet.” Undertaker patted the top of Winter’s head like he was a puppy. “I thought you might want to be here for that.” He smiled at Winter, who had a hand over his heart. Tears began to pour from the corners of Winter’s eyes, and he flew at Undertaker. The biker raised his fists as if he was going to punch someone, but Winter ducked in and wrapped his arms around Undertaker’s trim middle, giving him a hard squeeze. Undertaker’s eyes widened and he gave me a look, clearly begging me to rescue him.

“Winter, that’s enough. You’re scaring the bikers,” Piers said with an amused grin. He slurped his coffee and stared hard at the floor when Undertaker glared at him. It took a few seconds for Winter to back off, but when he did, he swiped at the tears on his cheeks and smiled around at everyone.

“We’re missing a laptop, too.”

Undertaker frowned at the car. “Let’s get the loot out and see what we find.”

It took us about an hour to destroy the car—and by us, I meant me, Piers, and Undertaker. Winter paced around watching us like a caged lion, worry setting in anew since the laptop wasn’t right here where it should be. There was money hidden in each seat, and while we didn’t unearth a laptop, we did all gather around to stare at a USB stick that had been taped to the bottom of the plastic shell surrounding the glove compartment.

“This could definitely be where the crypto currency is stored,” Piers said, taking the USB stick from Winter, who had been glaring at it like it was an exotic bug. “I can check if someone lets me borrow a computer.”

“I have a laptop in the house,” Undertaker said with a sigh. All the cash we’d found was stacked on the trunk of the car, and there was a lot of it. “I have a money counter in there, too. We can take this party inside. My pet’s asleep, though, so keep

your voices down.” He scowled around at all of us. “He has a harder time taking direction when he hasn’t slept enough.” His expression melted into a grin. “I only like him sleep deprived because of me.”

Reaper helped us move the cash to the house, and it filled a coffee table surrounded by red leather couches near a fireplace. Undertaker got a fire going, brought us all more coffee, and it was a regular cash extravaganza. He sat cross-legged on the stone floor next to the table counting money with a notebook at his side while Winter and I snuggled on the couch. Reaper was on a different couch with his head back and eyes closed. It was hard to say when the bikers last slept if they’d been on the hunt for money all this time. Piers sat beside Undertaker on the floor with the borrowed laptop screen casting his face in a ghostly blue glow.

“Well, this was quite the night. We’ve got over three million here.” Undertaker said, stretching his arms high above his head. Sunlight streamed through the windows but hadn’t crept across the floor to meet us yet.

Winter groaned. “Van cleaned out all my jewelry and supplies. It should’ve amounted to more than that.”

“You’ve got another two million here, as soon as we sell this crypto and get it converted to dollars,” Piers said with a smile. “I think it’s more money than he got from you. It might be some of the stuff he’d stolen on our last couple of jobs. He never told me what he was doing with the cash we made.”

“I have no idea how to do that tech garbage,” I grumped.

“Me neither,” Winter said with a worried frown.

“I do.” Undertaker shrugged. He fought back a yawn that made him close his eyes.

“Me too,” Piers said, and I hated to admit it, but I’d underestimated him. I’d figured he was just a sex toy Vance had picked up somewhere.

“What else can you do?” I asked.

Piers glanced up at me. “I’m good with security systems. I don’t know why, but I get computer programs in a way I

don't. . . pretty much everything else.”

Undertaker stood up and stretched like a cat, putting one leg out at an angle and bending forward till both hands touched the floor. “I’ve been awake for fifty hours, gentlemen.” He grinned. “I’ll have Aaron, whom I know you’ve been in touch with, deliver the money to you, minus our fee. I can take care of the exchange of the crypto currency if you want.” He raised his eyebrows at us as he straightened, and while I might not have trusted the man I’d met who disposed of bodies, this tired fellow in a beat to hell suit was someone I could relate to.

“Sure. What do you say, Winter?”

He grinned and nodded. “I can’t believe you trust anyone with the cash,” he murmured to me. “Aren’t you the one who told me not to trust people?”

Undertaker crossed his arms. “I’m a King, and the Kings don’t fuck around about money. You have my word, you’ll get every dollar here, minus the fee you agreed on.” He held out his hand to Winter, and they shook.

“Can you meet me at my bank with the cash?” Winter asked with a sheepish smile. “I’m scared to walk around with it after what happened.”

“We’ll do that,” Reaper said, and everyone looked at him. His eyes were still closed.

“Give me two days to convert the crypto,” Undertaker said around yet another yawn.

After that we said our goodbyes and left, driving carefully through snow that had started to pelt down back toward the Courtesan. Winter stared out the window at the dancing flakes and snow-covered trees lining the road while a frown tugged on his lips.

“I thought you would be happy after we found the money,” I said.

He glanced at me and smiled. “I am. I’m also disappointed. I worked so hard on that necklace for Madam Winters, and I’d hoped, deep in my heart, that we would recover it. I spent so

much time designing it and making it perfect just for her. It had my soul in it. No other person will be able to wear it as well as she would've, and I feel bad for whoever bought it, too." He shook his head.

I laughed. "You sound like such an artist."

He shrugged. "I am one."

"You can make another necklace."

He sputtered and slapped my thigh. "No, I can't make the same piece twice," he said quietly. "Even if I could, I wouldn't."

"But you can make something new. Something better than what you did last time. You know the flaws that were in the work and you can avoid them."

He rested his hand on my arm. "You're right. I'm not screwed. I'll do something even better this time, and Madam Winters will tell all her friends about it and show my work off. Orders will come pouring in." He shimmied in his seat, and I shared a smile with him.

"I'm sorry, Winter. I didn't realize that I wasn't just helping to steal some rocks from you," Piers said from the back seat. When I glanced in the rearview mirror, pure misery was etched on his face. He'd been so quiet that I'd almost forgotten he was there. "That's a beautiful sentiment."

Winter turned in his seat and stared at Piers. "You know, I could use someone to set up some sort of electronic tracking system for me. This experience taught me that I don't keep a good enough inventory. If I had gone to the police, I never would've been able to prove what I had in stock beyond a few pictures I'd taken. You're nice and helpful, so you could work the sales floor. I know Madam Winters gave you a job at the Courtesan, but I would pay you well, maybe better, and you could have a floor in the building to live in." He smiled at Piers and it was like a ray of sunshine.

"Are you sure about this?" I couldn't stop myself from asking the question. "Really sure?"

Winter nodded at me, far more serious than I'd ever seen him.

"Thank you, I would like that. Maybe I can do both jobs," Piers said.

When we arrived at the hotel, Piers was the first to jump out and rush inside. Winter moved to open his door, and I snagged his hand. "You're a better man than I am. How can you forgive him like that?"

Winter stared after Piers as he disappeared into the hotel. "I had a drink with him and let him tell me what happened. He was hurt, RJ. He was lied to and mistreated. He thought he was doing something bad, sure, but he didn't think he was hurting anyone. That's the difference, isn't it?" He turned to study my face. "When he met me and realized he was doing something really wrong, he helped me. He even killed for me." Winter's steady gaze made me feel stripped to the soul. "I believe that people can change. An old part of someone can die and a new part can be born." He gave me a bitter little smile. "I wasn't always like this. I didn't like the man I used to be, so I became someone new. I'm Winter Janvier! Not Jake Smith." He winked at me.

"Your name is—"

"*Was!* Never speak it in my presence," he grumbled, but a smile still turned up a corner of his mouth.

I brought his hand up and kissed it. "You're not staying at the Courtesan anymore."

"I could go home now," he said, cutting a look at the grand old hotel. "I want to buy a new bed though." He stuck out his tongue, and I had to laugh.

"Come stay with me. Not the night. Stay till you're sick of me."

Winter tilted his head. Almost a minute ticked by and nerves clawed at the inside of my chest.

Finally, he smiled. "Yes, Daddy. I would like that."

"You're such a good boy. I don't deserve you."

“Yes, you do,” he said firmly, then leaned over and kissed me. The sweet press of his soft lips against mine was a miracle, and I could tell he was going to transform my life into something new, something different—something worth living.

EPILOGUE

WINTER



Christmas Eve

MY LOWER BACK ACHED AS I SLID THE CHAIR AWAY FROM THE dining room table at RJ's house. I had tools scattered around and a few opals I hadn't needed winked in the overhead light. I'd been inspired, and this necklace wouldn't be the replacement I owed Madam Winters, though I was still going to give it to her. No, this was a new idea. I teared up as I stared down at the delicate choker.

I'd been so inspired by the *essence of mistletoe* for my first idea that when I'd made my original piece I hadn't incorporated enough elements of wintertime into it, or at least, I didn't think so. I touched my fingertip to the opals set in white gold surrounded by diamond chips—which represented ice—and caressed along the links I'd studded with emeralds to mimic the greenery of the plant.

"I'll be home for Christmas," RJ sang lowly as he came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I laughed and noticed the old song playing over the sound system. I'd been so focused on my work I hadn't been aware of much going on around me. "You're home for Christmas," he whispered in my ear, his warm breath sending a shiver down my spine.

"Mm-hmm," I said, leaning to the side so I could press a kiss on his cheek, but he was too tall for me to reach that far. I settled for smooching his neck instead.

"This is beautiful." He leaned closer to the table, bending me along with him to examine my creation.

"Thanks. I hope Madam Winters likes it."

"She'll love it. Come on. I have a surprise for you downstairs." He grabbed my hand and tugged on it, urging me along.

"Okay, okay," I said with a laugh, following him. I sighed as we reached the bottom of the steps because the smell of pine was heavy on the air. He'd set up a live Christmas tree in

one corner, far away from the fireplace, and the lights were lit. There weren't many ornaments, but the tasteful icicles arranged here and there all reflected the green and white lights, making the room glitter with holiday cheer.

"Oh," I said, going up on the balls of my feet as I framed the scene with my hands to really take it in. "My sister Mary would love this."

RJ gave me a squeeze. "Your sister's name is Mary?"

"Yeah." I shrugged. "She texted me and told me that since Mom is in the middle of packing up her house for the second time this year she was just staying with a friend from school. Thank you. I love this."

"Good, but the tree isn't your surprise." He turned me toward the fireplace, and I'd been so snagged by the pretty lights that I hadn't noticed what he'd done over there. A thick red comforter with two snow-white pillows at the top was spread out on the floor, and I shook my head with a smile on my face as he led me over there. When we were beside the blanket, he pointed upward.

I laughed at the sprig of mistletoe he'd hung from the ceiling. "You got me. Now I owe you a kiss."

RJ leaned down and turned his cheek toward me, and I went up on tiptoe to kiss his lips instead. He pulled me close and attacked my mouth with his, crashing our bodies together. He cradled me closer and didn't let go. I was a quivering mess with a huge problem by the time he dropped me down on my feet again.

"Happy Christmas Eve, baby." He kissed my forehead, and I hugged him tight.

"Is this my present? Because an evening by the fire with you is perfect."

"No, this is," he said, then bent down to tug a small, tissue-wrapped package from between the pillows. He handed the present to me, and I frowned and opened the folded paper. As black leather and diamonds came into view, I gasped, ripping the paper faster.

“Is this a blindfold, Daddy?” I ran my finger around the edge of the mask. I couldn’t tell if the diamonds creating a simple outline were real or not, but it was beautiful either way. I rubbed one gem with my thumb and decided they were likely authentic. Sometimes a design got in the way of the materials, and this was inspirational—a bit of bling on a daily use object. I twisted the leather this way and that to watch the diamonds glitter.

RJ cleared his throat, and I was surprised when I glanced up. Pink spread across his face—*is he blushing?*—and he smiled. “This is a piece of playtime fun I want to use with you because love is blind. And I would like to try it with you. Love, I mean. Finally putting the past to rest will let me make another attempt, for real. I have feelings for you, Winter, and I want to see how far they go. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I wrapped my arms around him and held him because I had no idea what to say. I was overwhelmed. “RJ, I don’t know everything about you yet, but from what I’ve seen you’re a really good man.”

He huffed as he stared down at me.

“I already love you, and I’m sorry, but I can’t help it. You stuck with me through the most awful thing that has ever happened in my life, and you didn’t flinch. You’re. . . my Daddy. My hero.”

He glared at me for a moment, but slowly a smile took over his face. “And you’re my boy, but I wanted to let you know this is about more than just sex. I needed to make it clear.”

Laughing, I stepped back and held up the mask as anticipation squirmed through me. “By giving me a diamond-studded mask so I can’t see?” I had to force myself to glance up at him because I was feeling shy.

He shrugged. “You make jewelry. Any ring I could buy wouldn’t be as nice as something you would make. This was unique and I knew you didn’t have one already. You don’t, do

you?” His last word was more of a growl and that deep, sex-infused sound swam through my insides and superheated me.

“No! Daddy, I love it.”

He took the mask from me, and I gulped as he settled it on my face. There was a leather strap with a buckle and he moved around behind me to tighten it.

The world went black.

“Daddy,” I murmured.

“I’m right here, baby. I’m going to undress you. Can you trust me to do that?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I whispered. With the mask covering my eyes, the fire in the grate sounded loud and I could hear the music upstairs, a faraway whisper of the holidays. Pleasant heat tickled my skin. Pine swirled in my nose. RJ’s scent, masculine and a little musky, teased my senses. He kissed my neck and shocked me, his stubble scraping along the sensitive area. Then he lifted my shirt up and off. I felt exposed, but the air was warm. He didn’t tell me what he was doing next, but he trailed his fingertips along my body and down my legs, and I lifted my foot when he started pulling off my left sock.

“Hold on to me,” he said with a chuckle, and I groped around and steadied myself on his shoulders as he took off my other sock. My pants were next, and I was surprised when he yanked my underwear down with them. I was naked and hadn’t been ready for it. My cock bobbed and without the distraction of sight it was all I could focus on.

“I’m here, boy. Your Daddy has you.”

I nodded. “I trust you, Daddy.”

He guided me to the comforter and the soft material had me smiling as I sat down. Fabric rustled and I thought he was moving something around.

“Lie on your front. Let me guide you,” he said.

Excitement tingled through me. I was extremely aware of a drop of precum slipping down my shaft. RJ touched my shoulder, and I rolled and ended up with my groin pressed

against a small mountain of soft pillows. I rested on my elbows.

“This is a precarious position, Daddy. Someone could come along and do all sorts of bad things to me.” I laughed at a light sting that erupted on my right asscheek.

“You’re damned right they could.” I curled my toes into the blanket as I listened to clothing get tossed, or at least, I assumed RJ was stripping. Gentle kisses traced along my lower back, and he chuckled when I tilted my ass higher.

“Do you need something from your Daddy?”

I nodded. “Yes, you know I do.”

“Like what?” He kissed down along the curve of my right asscheek.

I shivered. “Your kisses are nice, Daddy. I need more of those.”

“Where would you like them? Here?”

I groaned and dropped my head when his warm lips landed on the back of my neck. “That’s nice, Daddy.” I stuck my ass out farther. “Maybe lower?”

“Oh, here?” Another kiss, right below my left shoulder blade.

Sighing, I shook my head, and he laughed. A few seconds passed and I moaned when he spread my asscheeks. His hot, slick tongue lapped over my asshole.

“There, Daddy. Right there!” I thrust back against his tongue, but it disappeared.

“Mm, I can see this is where you need kisses. Do you want something else, too?”

I was having trouble thinking because he licked from the back of my balls up to my hole again, and I moaned and couldn’t stay still as I ground against the pillows. The soft fabric cradling my cock sent a gentle thrill racing through me.

“Daddy, why don’t you come in me tonight? That can be my gift to you.” I smiled as his breath caught, and then he

moaned and fucked his tongue into my ass. I scrabbled at the comforter.

“I love eating your little hole. Fuck, it’s good. And you want Daddy’s sauce in here, huh?”

I nodded and glanced over my shoulder in the direction of his voice, but of course, I couldn’t see anything. “Please, Daddy. I want it. I want you.” I shoved my ass back toward him, going up on my knees.

But Daddy wouldn’t be rushed, and he spent a long time kissing and teasing my hole, until I fell back down and fucked against the pillow, feeling like I was ready to pop. My thighs began to shake and he ran his hands along the backs of them, massaging the muscles.

“Okay, Daddy played with you long enough,” he said, nibbling my right hip. I jumped at the strange sensation, but he sucked a kiss there.

“I was good and didn’t come yet,” I mumbled, feeling dazed. I had a lot of trouble anytime Daddy tied me down. It was just so fucking hot, but thankfully me coming too soon didn’t stop things much because I was always ready to go again fast. Everything he wanted to do with me was so amazing.

“I’m moving you, baby. Come here.”

I felt dizzy as he sat me up on my knees, and I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do, so I clung to him. He ended up mostly lifting me, and I finally figured out what he was up to as he dragged me onto his lap, facing him. Eventually I moved my legs around until they were on either side of him, and next thing I knew his cock was nudging my hole. He was slicked up, but he hadn’t put any lube in me.

“Daddy?”

“There’s plenty, boy. It won’t hurt as long as you don’t tense up. Trust Daddy.”

Nodding, I eased down onto his cock, and it was the best fucking feeling in the world as he pumped past my happy button. I slid my hands up RJ’s strong chest, stopping to play

with the hair in the center, then clung to his shoulders as I settled completely onto his cock. His breath was ragged in my ear as my asscheeks nudged his groin. Rocking my hips experimentally caused him to hold me tight.

“Fuck yourself on Daddy,” he whispered in my ear, and with a groan, I nodded. His scent was so much stronger as I buried my face against his chest, and his muscles were sculpted rocks under me. I put my feet on the comforter and pushed up. Sitting down again was such a rush and felt amazing. My groin tightened and my cockhead tingled. I pressed my hard-on against his fuzzy stomach and relished the warmth of his skin.

“Yes, Daddy, I love this.” I picked up speed.

“You’re such a precious boy, Winter. You’re a Christmas angel. Holy fuck.”

Grinning, I kept going, but the better his cock felt in my ass, the harder it was for me to coordinate my muscles. I started to whimper as I lost the ability to fuck fast enough.

“Shh, Daddy’s got you.” RJ grabbed my thighs, and I held on tight as he thrust up into me much faster than I’d been able to ride him, and not long later I was clinging to him and gasping as my limbs shook and cum blasted from my cock. Pleasure pummeled me and I cried out as my balls emptied. I yelled as he kept going because it felt too good to keep the sounds inside.

“Yes, do it, baby. Fuck, Winter.” He groaned and shoved up into me while gravity pulled me down, and I shuddered at the sensation of being stuffed completely full. Daddy’s cock twitched in my asshole, and I clung to him as warmth filled my insides—just hot and different enough that I knew I had his cum deep in my ass.

“Daddy, this is so good.”

His lips covered my mouth. I swooned and almost fell backward as he gently fluttered the tip of his tongue with mine. After a while, he moved around, then helped me off his lap. I felt strange when I was sitting on my knees again. He

tugged me down, and I ended up snuggled against his side. He unbuckled the mask. For a while after it slipped off my face, I kept my eyes closed. He kissed my right cheek, then my left one.

When I finally looked at Daddy, he was smiling at me, his stern features softer than usual. The mask lay on his chest, and I traced my fingertips over it. When I rested my head on his shoulder and stared at the ceiling, I smiled because the diamonds danced rainbows around the room.

My life used to be lonely, the darkness of the longest night of winter, but now I had my Daddy and it was bright and different—a reflection of everything I'd always been working toward without even knowing it.

“I love you, Daddy. I don't need to wait to find that out.”

“Winter, I love you, too, and it scares the fuck out of me,” he murmured back, stark and sincere as always.

I held him tight, and he didn't let go of me all night.

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