



ENVELOPED

BEAUTIFUL DECEIT SERIES

BY THE

WHAT THEY FORGED IN THE DARK,

DARKNESS

CAN NEVER BE DESTROYED.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FELICITY BRANDON

Enveloped By The Darkness

Beautiful Deceit series

Book Four

By

Felicity Brandon

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First edition February 2023

Cover design by Wicked Smart Designs.

Editing by Personal Touch Editing.

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“We don’t see things as they are, we see them as *we* are.”

Anais Nin.

Prologue

Detective Sergeant Lucas

Cold cases were the bane of my life. Sometimes, as I fell asleep at night, their victims would crawl to my bedside, prodding at me for progress.

Have you forgotten us?

A chorus of their voices would circle, plaguing me as I clawed for sleep.

We're still there, you know. Sprawled out there in the darkness... waiting for justice.

“I know.”

Sitting at my desk, I hadn't meant to say the words out loud, but the disembodied voices had grown louder in recent weeks. A crowd of frantic women who'd chosen to haunt me, making rest damn near impossible.

“Guv?” Detective Constable Granger looked up from his screen. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” I muttered, exhaling as I glanced out at the gray, grim cityscape.

Damn. I really must be tired if I was starting to vocalize my thoughts without realizing it. I needed to relax more, but that only seemed plausible if I could exorcise the ghosts of some of those nameless victims. So many perpetrators went without punishment. People who lacked any essence of a conscience were left to wander the streets. No wonder the country was so dangerous. It was a miracle the Crown Prosecution Service put anyone away.

Sighing, I leaned back in my chair and stretched my tired limbs. This never-ending line of dead ends was not why I'd

signed up with the police service. Once upon a time, I'd thought I could make a difference—help people—but these days, that seemed less and less likely. My career had morphed into one long line of paperwork and a lingering sense of uselessness. Some days, I didn't know why I got out of bed.

“Here you go, Guv.”

I'd been so lost in my quagmire, I hadn't noticed Granger standing by my desk. Placing a huge pile of files on the counter, he sheepishly shifted his weight.

“What's this?” I asked, downing the coffee, regardless of its temperature.

“Unresolved cases for the last twelve months.” Granger's brow rose as though he, too, couldn't believe how poorly we'd performed. “I thought you might like one more look before they're archived.”

Flicking through the wad of paper, I blew out a breath. “Isn't this all online?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “But you know how it is. Out of sight, out of mind. Once they get archived, they don't tend to see the light of day again.”

It was a depressingly accurate analysis.

“You're right. I'll take a look.” I barely had the time, but the incessant specters of our failures insisted I acquiesce. I'd never get any rest unless I said yes. “Leave them here and start work on the Dale case.”

“Fancy a fresh brew?” Nodding at my cup, he patted the top file. “I'm parched.”

“Sure.” Managing a smile, I thrust the mug in his direction. “Thanks.”

I watched as he trudged back to his desk and collected his cup. Ten years my junior, Granger had dark hair and a tight ass. He might have been more enticing if we didn't have to spend so many soul-crushing hours crammed in the office

together, but as it was, all I saw was my subordinate—a colleague I had learned to lean on.

Reaching for the top file, my gaze scanned over the victim's details. *Tiffany Noble*. At least this one wasn't dead, but it sure as hell was a strange case. Tiffany had been the victim of a stalker who'd taken up residence in her home without her knowledge. So far, so weird, but her story had got even more peculiar when, after breaking free of his clutches, she'd made the crazy decision to start a twisted consensual relationship with him. Weeks later, the romance had seemed to implode, and Tiffany had got back in touch once she'd started therapy.

“Good for you,” I murmured, logging into my secure profile and pulling up the case.

I wanted Tiffany to be okay, to be in the minority of women who survived and got over her ordeal and even though I didn't understand some of the choices she'd made, I was glad she was free of the predator who'd hunted her. Clicking on his details, I pulled up his profile.

Kade Walker.

An image of his smirking face burst onto the screen, reminding me of the slimy son-of-a-bitch who'd caused the trauma. We'd never had the opportunity to hold him in custody but had tracked him after he'd fled Tiffany's house. In the end, she'd refused to press charges, rendering our case irrelevant, but somehow, I hadn't been able to forget his crime. There was something so insidious about hiding in another person's home and taking them prisoner. It smacked of a criminal mind who'd acted before, and I couldn't believe that this was his first offense.

“At least she dumped his sorry ass.”

The thought emboldened me as I searched her employment details. The last I'd heard, she'd headed a big trial and had helped send the suspect down for ten years. That was the definition of moving on. Lifting the receiver of my

desk phone, I punched in the numbers, waiting as the dialing tone echoed in my ear.

“Rex Everly,” a gruff male voice answered curtly.

“Hi,” I replied, clearing my throat. “This is D.S. Lucas. I’m following up on an open case and wondered if you could help.”

“D.S. Lucas?”

I could hear the bewilderment in his voice.

“Is my office handling one of your cases?”

“No,” I clarified. “The victim, in my case, works for you.”

“Oh.” That stopped him in his tracks. “Can I ask who?”

“Of course.” I wanted to laugh. If I didn’t want to share the information, I wouldn’t be calling in the first place. “Miss Tiffany Noble.”

“Tiff?” His puzzlement was palpable. “What about her? Has something happened?”

What was that in his voice? Unease?

“I’m not sure what you know,” I went on. “But Miss Noble was involved in a kidnap and harassment case earlier this year.” Surely, he knew about it. She must have taken weeks away from work.

“Oh, you mean the trouble with Kade?” He chuckled, as if the allegations against Walker were trivial. It wasn’t what I expected from a man who ran a prosecution office.

“Trouble isn’t how I would describe it,” I answered, confused by his cavalier attitude. No wonder we weren’t securing convictions if this was how the lawyers handled them. “The allegations were serious, Mr. Everly.”

“Oh, I know.” His tone was clipped. “But there was no persuading Tiff to press charges. In fact, the last I saw of her, she was insistent about him.”

“What?” I demanded, gripping the receiver even tighter. “What do you mean, the last you saw of her? Doesn’t she work for you?”

“Not anymore.”

My heart raced as Granger arrived with my coffee. Mouthing my gratitude, my focus returned to Everly’s explanation.

“She left more than a month ago.”

“To go where?” It was really none of my business, but the idea that she’d just up and left when she was in therapy and doing so well at work was suspicious.

“I don’t have all the details.” His tone suggested he missed her more than he was letting on. “But apparently, whatever they had together was more important than our Chambers.”

“Whatever *who* had together?” My brows knitted as I drew the hot drink toward me.

“Tiff and Kade.”

I swore my heart missed a beat as I processed his words. “You mean they’re together again?” That was news to me.

“Yep. She moved south to be with him, quit her job and went to play happily ever after.” His cynical laughter suggested he was about as skeptical as I was. “I haven’t heard from her since.”

Jesus. Holding the receiver away from my face, I stared at the grinning expression of Walker flickering on my computer screen. What the hell had Tiffany been thinking? She’d abandoned her life to run off and be with the man who’d terrorized her.

“Detective?” Everly’s insistent tone drew me back to the phone.

“Yes, sorry...”

“Is there anything else? I have a busy day ahead.”

“No.” His admission had caught me totally off guard. “Not unless you have a forwarding address for Miss Noble?”

“Unless you have an active case, we both know I don’t have to give you that.” His chuckle grated on my nerves. “But in truth, I don’t have one. Only her mobile number, which I assume is still current.”

“Ending 7432?” I confirmed, scanning the personal details we had on file.

“Yes, that’s the one,” he replied.

“Okay, thanks for your time, Mr. Everly.”

“Thank you, Detective Sergeant.”

Placing down the receiver, I stared at the screen as the line went dead.

“Problem, Guv?” Granger’s brow furrowed as my gaze rose to meet his.

“Not exactly,” I mumbled, trying to fathom what I’d learned. “More like an unexpected development.”

I had no evidence that anything was wrong, and no new crimes had been committed. By all accounts, Tiffany had gone with Walker of her own free will, but nothing about it sounded right to me. Everything about the case had been wrong from the start, and the latest twist filled me with nagging anxiety. Sipping my coffee, I reread her most recent victim statement, looking for any detail I might have missed. I’d let this case pass me by once before, but it wouldn’t happen again.

Chapter One

Kade Walker

A blanket of gold and crimson leaves carpeted the lawns as we strolled hand in hand. Breathing in the fresh autumnal air, my eyes closed as I halted beneath an old elm tree and pulled her toward me.

“Come here,” I whispered, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her hair. “Let me hold you.”

“But Master!” Cheeks flaming, Tiffany glanced around guiltily. “You only just had me.”

“Mmmm,” I purred, smiling at the delicious recollection. “I remember.”

“You’re insatiable,” she murmured, though I sensed it wasn’t a complaint.

The estate looked better than ever, thanks to Noel and the team of other gardeners I’d employed to help him. The trees and rolling grassland were as beautiful as the interior of the house. Glancing back at Barrington House, I realized I was happy. My brows knitted at the perturbing thought. For the first time in my life, I was living at Barrington, and everything was good. The sky had never been so blue.

“Have you heard back from your new boss?”

It was odd referring to another person as Tiffany’s boss when we both accepted, she had only one master, but being content at my ancestral home meant I was more at ease with the premise of her working. It had been incredible having her to myself since she’d left Rex’s Chambers, but I accepted she needed more. She always had.

“Yes.” Her lips twitched as she gazed up into my eyes. “She wants me to start on Friday next week—meet the team

before the weekend—then dive in properly the week after.”

“*She?*” I didn’t know why I was surprised to hear there was a woman in charge.

“Yes,” she replied. “Her name is Julia Simmons.”

“Okay.” Stroking the side of her cooling face, I lowered to kiss her temple. “From Friday, I’ll share you with Julia, but until then, you’re all mine.”

Catching her lip between her teeth, she giggled, and my balls clenched at the tantalizing sound.

“I’ll always be all yours, Master.” Rising to her tiptoes, her lips grazed the stubble at my jaw. “No matter who I work for.”

There’s my girl.

“That’s true,” I praised, collecting her hair as the breeze threatened to toss it around. “I just want you to know that I’m fully on board with your new role.”

“Thank you.” She pressed her lips to my chin. “What about my schedule?”

“What about it?” Gripping her hair tighter, I held her in place as I nuzzled her warm neck.

“Will the same rules apply as before, Master?” Her voice was breathy, demonstrating how much she relished my ministrations.

“Do you mean, will I drive you to work and collect you each day?” Arousal flooded my brain, blinding me to everything but her alluring skin. She was right. I was insatiable, unable to focus on anything else when she was with me.

“Y-Yes,” she gasped as I straightened, stroking her nape with my free hand. “I suppose that’s what I mean.”

“Initially, yes.”

The thought of letting her go was almost painful, but it would help to physically go to her new place of work to get a feel for the Chambers and watch her step over the threshold. That was what I was good at, after all—watching, waiting, and biding my time. It was how she'd come to be mine.

“Once we're in a routine, perhaps you can drive yourself, little girl.” I could hardly believe what I was saying. Tiffany had changed me, as had being forced back to Barrington. I could no longer hide behind the mask of the monster. Dealing with the demons inside my home had started me on a journey of self-development, which meant accepting if Tiffany was truly mine, that I could let her go and she'd always come back. “We'll see.”

“I like you driving me, Master.” She breathed the words into my neck, the sound almost lost to the autumn breeze. “But it is a waste of your time.”

“Being with you is never a waste,” I corrected her.

“You know what I mean.” Her big blue eyes flashed at me as an adorable blush rose to her cheeks. “You have your own life as well, Master.”

“Yes.” Gazing back at the house, the enormity of her statement struck me. For the first time, I had responsibilities, bills to pay and employees who looked to me. Coming back to Barrington had turned everything on its head. “Do you like it here?” I didn't know why I was asking. It wasn't as though I'd given her much of a choice, and in the end, it had been Tiffany who'd wanted to live with me.

“Of course.” Twisting, she followed my gaze. “It's gorgeous. All of it is more incredible than I could ever have imagined.”

“Yes,” I repeated, my gaze settling on one of the upstairs windows where, for one disconcerting moment, I could have sworn I saw a small boy sitting by the pane.

Time had not erased the many devils lurking in the hallways, though the lick of paint and new furnishings had

helped cast them into the shadows. I still had a lot of work to do if I was ever going to leave my father's abuse behind me.

"Master." Brow furrowing, she reached one tiny hand toward my face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." Capturing her wrist, I met her concerned eyes.

"Are you thinking about him again?" she whispered. "Your father."

A ball of anxiety knotted in my chest as she waited for my answer. Revealing some of my past to Tiffany had been the most difficult confession of my life, far harder than the admission of what I'd done. Somehow, disclosing what had happened to me was suffocating, the declaration that I had been vulnerable—had suffered—almost intolerable. But this was Tiffany, the woman I'd staked my entire future happiness on. If I couldn't be honest with her, then what was the point?

"In a way." My attention flitted back to the window to find the boy gone. "But more about myself, the boy I was, the man I've become."

"I still wish you'd see someone." Leaning into my palm, her eyelids fluttered closed. "Talk to a professional."

"I don't need anyone but you." Caressing the side of her face, the idea cemented. She was my everything. Who else did I need?

"And you know I'm always ready to listen, Master." She smiled. "But I have a feeling whatever happened was more than I'm qualified to help you with."

Shit, she was right. The things my father had done in that house when I was only a child were terrible. How could I expect anyone else to carry the burden of his perversion? It was bad enough that the trauma had no doubt helped mold me into the man I'd become, encouraging me to do the things I had done... It wasn't an excuse, but it was true. My father's legacy had a lot to answer for.

“Let’s not ruin the mood by talking about it now, eh?”
Blowing out a breath, I turned away from the house. “It’s such a beautiful day.”

“If that’s what you want.” Doubt flickered in her gaze.
“I’m always here.”

“I know.” Reaching around her middle, I pulled her flush against me, seeking the solace of her body heat. “And God knows I love you for it, but it’s...” Hesitating, my eyes closed as I stumbled for the words. I didn’t even have the vocabulary for the emotions I was trying to process, but a part of me still loathed showing so much weakness in front of her. I was her man, her master. I was supposed to have the answers, not be endlessly susceptible.

“It’s okay,” she murmured, planting another gentle kiss on my jaw. “There’s no pressure, Master. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m fine,” I reassured her, opening my eyes and brushing my mouth over hers. “Let’s walk some more.”

“Okay.” Nodding, she untangled herself from me and allowed me to scoop up her palm and lead her on past the elm.

The haunting of Barrington House was far from over, but the specters could wait. I had someone better to concentrate on.

Chapter Two

Tiffany Noble

“I’m thinking of getting more staff.” Kade’s voice was thoughtful as he lounged by the fireplace. “I have a team to help old Noel, but the house could use more people.”

Hours after our wander in the gardens and after a visit to the monochrome room he’d developed for me, we were ensconced by his grandiose hearth.

“A part-time chef, perhaps.” He mused aloud, sighing as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. “Plus a few cleaners.”

I clenched at the prophecy, not sure how I would cope with a greater entourage, given my current circumstance. Naked, save for the purple tassels hanging from my nipples, the matching lilac leather at my neck and butt plug that was no doubt visible from behind me, I was on all fours at his feet. Anyone wandering into the wood-paneled lounge would be able to see me. I panted at the thought of greater opportunities for ignominy.

“Little girl?”

Christ, he expected me to answer while I was like this? Swallowing back what little pride lingered, I shook my head, trying not to throw his feet off balance on the small of my back.

“I-I don’t know, Master.” My head spun at his ricocheting expectations. One moment he wanted a silent submissive, and the next he required small talk about help around the house. “Whatever you think will work best.” He knew the house, after all, and it was enormous. It probably had a list of never-ending requirements.

“Good answer, little girl.” He chuckled, tapping the tongue of his riding crop against my upturned ass. “You’re learning.”

My head fell at his condescending tone, acknowledging how much I both despised and demanded it in equal measure. Kade knew just how to worm his way into my headspace, which buttons to press to get the results he wanted, and invariably those results were always my shameful hedonism, though increasingly I experienced less disgrace the more I came to terms with my proclivities.

“Yes, Master.” I smiled as I answered, leaning into my submission. It no longer bothered me that this was what turned me on. Despite everything, I trusted Kade. What we had was one in a million, something sacred I was prepared to sacrifice for, but the idea of having a permanent audience was disturbing. If he hired a houseful of staff, that could be the reality—witnesses to my denigration.

“Maybe we’ll talk about this more another time.” His tone was knowing as his feet slid from my back. “What do you think?”

“Yes, please, Master.” My breathing sped up as he slipped from the leather couch to the thick pile carpet beside me.

“Have I told you how bloody incredible you look like this?” His breath was hot on my shoulder as his hands swept over my body, one skimming over the skin his feet had rested on, while the other cradled the weight of my right breast.

“No, Master.”

The truth was, I couldn’t remember what he’d told me. When he wound me up into a frenzy of excited emotion like this, it was difficult to recall any of the details. All I could focus on were the feelings—the desire to please him and the yearning to leap into freefall.

“Is that right?” His laughter washed over me. “Are you sure?”

“Master?”

I turned my head in his direction, uncertain about the correct answer. Kade was toying with me. That much was obvious because it was what he enjoyed the most, and the best part was, I relished it as well. I'd never thought of myself as incomplete until he tore into my life, but now it was obvious for anyone to see—he was the other half of me, the darkness to my light.

“Shhh,” he soothed, his lips snuggling the sensitive part of my nape as he climbed into position behind me. “It’s a trick question, little girl, but you’re safe. Your master is too damn hungry for you.”

Settling between my spread thighs, the warmth of his breath tickled my flesh as his fingers grazed the backs of my legs.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.”

My eyes flickered shut at the fervor in his voice. I would never tire of hearing it.

“Master.” I couldn’t resist the tremble in mine, my craving vocalized in the waver. “Please.”

“What do you need, little girl?” he asked, although clarification was barely necessary.

For one thing, my demands were irrelevant. Kade would take what he wanted whenever he chose to. The collar at my neck was his idea, just like the four inches of plastic dominating my ass. He understood I hankered for them but would never have the audacity to ask for what I wanted, but moreover, we both knew I’d never need to. Kade would always be there to deliver.

He knew I would cede to his will, as I always did, because that was what got me hotter than anything else. I’d finally found a man who would push me past the depths of my desires and make sure I reveled in them.

“You, Master.” I gave the answer, regardless, hoping it would expedite the pleasure, but really, I should have known better. My master liked to torment, to leave me dangling, and

of course, my body betrayed how much I welcomed the promise of his touch. “I need you, please.”

“Like this?” He was so close to me, only an inch from my pleading sex, as he gently eased my ass cheeks apart and kissed my sensitive flesh.

“Oh God, yes,” I enthused, ignoring my aching shoulders and focusing on the sweet caress of his lips. “Yes, please, Master.”

“More?” Chuckling, he lapped at my pussy, working his tongue south to nudge my throbbing clit before he pulled away.

Of course, more! The answer exploded in my mind, but I dared not speak it.

“My little girl is so greedy.”

“Yes, Master.” There was no point in denial. That was Kade’s game, after all. His to gift, and his to take away. “Please.”

“So needy.” Drawing away, he slapped my exposed cheek with his palm. Gasping at the sudden hurt, I mewled, wanting more. “So. Fucking. Greedy.” As if he read my mind, he spanked me again, punctuating each word with a fresh swat. “But I adore her.”

His mouth delved into my sex once more, devouring me with his lips before his tongue slid into my heat, stoking my arousal to the breaking point. Slowly, he possessed me, bringing me to the brink while I whimpered for mercy, before turning down the dial just enough to keep me simmering.

“Oh God!”

Clenching around the butt plug, I couldn’t think straight. I wanted him inside me, but I needed to come. I couldn’t wait a moment longer, yet I never wanted the ordeal to be over.

“You are amazing,” he praised, panting as he rose to his knees and kissed my ass cheek. “You make me so hard.”

“Master.” I scarcely recognized my own voice. “Please.”

It was always the same. By the end, I didn’t even know what I was begging for.

“It’s okay,” he promised, cocooning my body with his hard, muscular frame. His cock, eager for my attention, sprang between my legs, grazing my aching clit. “You’re going to get what you want, but only when I say so.”

I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“Tell me who you are and who you belong to.”

One of his hands rose to my throat, squeezing just enough to remind me of his authority. Not that I—the woman on her knees with her ass filled with plastic—needed any reminders.

“Your whore, Master,” I replied unthinkingly, not caring how dehumanizing it sounded to refer to myself that way. That was the point—the very crux of the reason he demanded my answer. I *was* his whore and would play the role for as long as it pleased us both.

“And?” The tip of his cock skimmed the entrance to my sex, teasing me with what was to come if I responded correctly.

“I belong to you, Master.”

Arching my back, I yearned to just take what I wanted, to push back and feel the heat of his rod consume me, but I knew what that act of impudence would earn me. I wasn’t about to risk the looming pleasure.

“That’s right, little girl.” His hand slid to my hair, fisting my tresses and forcing my head back. “You’re all mine, and I get to prove it.”

I called out as he dove into me, lost in the carnal connection. The only thing that made any sense was Kade and his all-seeing influence. I had given up my old job and house for him, and as his balls banged against me, I knew I would do it again—as many times as was needed to prove my adoration.

“You’re so lovely,” he breathed, nipping at my neck as his pace slowed. “So bloody divine.”

“Master.” I grinned, despite the uncomfortable position his fist held my head in, blooming under his approval as though a part of me had been lying dormant all those years, just waiting for his admiration.

“So wet.” Glee echoed in his voice, and I imagined his contagious smile. “You love being my footrest, don’t you, whore?”

“Yes, Master.” I did love it.

“There at my beck and call at my feet.”

Oh God, when he said it out loud—especially as he drilled in and out of my exposed sex—it sounded even hotter.

“Yes, Master.”

“I know who you are, whore.” His hips stilled, pushing his cock even deeper into me. “What you need.”

Squeezing myself around him, I moaned with enthusiasm.

“That’s why we’re so perfect for one another.” Releasing my hair, his hands returned to my ass, yanking my cheeks apart as he eased me along his shaft at his leisure. “Why you’ll always be mine.”

“Oh, Master.” I couldn’t take much more, this slower pace even more tantalizing than the faster, more frenetic one.

“Get down, whore.” The weight of his palm pushed me toward the carpet as his other hand slapped my vulnerable ass. “I’m going to screw you into the floor where you deserve to be.”

No idea had ever sounded better as I pressed my chest into the pile and splayed my legs. His hand tangled in my tresses as he lowered over me, his cock slamming into me until I cried out.

“Yes,” he decided through gritted teeth. “This is definitely what you deserve.”

Whimpering, I watched the strain in the sinews of his arm as he pounded me, his body stilling as he pumped cum inside my pussy.

“Fuck.” Collapsing over me, he blew out a satisfied breath as he rolled me into his embrace. “That was phenomenal, little girl. Just imagine how magnificent your submission will be once we have a team of help around the house.”

“Yes, Master.”

Cozying into his chest, I ran my fingers through his soft hair. I wanted to tell him how the thought of being watched made me feel, but realized the admission was futile. Kade already knew. That was the point. I would take what I was given, not only because it drove me wild with lust, but because I was head over heels in love with the man delivering it.

Kissing the top of my head, he purred into my ear. “We are going to have so many adventures.”

I couldn't even begin to imagine.

Chapter Three

D.S. Lucas

Tiffany Noble. I couldn't let the idea of her go. It always concerned me when victims of crime returned to perpetrators, but something about her gnawed more than most. Tiffany wasn't like the average coerced woman we saw in the police service. Her story was different. An independent professional in her own right, Tiffany worked on the right side of the law, and based on the things I'd garnered from Everly, was good at her job. Why would she have left the role to pursue a so-called relationship with her abductor, but then, why would she have run away with him at all?

Stockholm Syndrome was a recognized condition after the type of trauma she'd endured, but still, her choices nagged. It was wrong to judge, but the fact that a well-educated and affluent woman like her could be swept away by such a sordid man felt like a betrayal. She should have known better, and however I looked at the details of the case, I couldn't get past it.

I'd spent the last few weeks burying myself in its detail, studying her statements over and over, before turning my focus to Walker. A man like that was bound to have a proven track record. Ensconcing himself in Noble's house was an audacious act. It wouldn't have been his first offense, especially given his sexual proclivities, so I dedicated all my spare time to reviewing old cases. Stalkers, sexual predators—anything that involved a solo male culprit intimidating women. Naturally, our system was full of cases that fit the bill. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, but however I rationalized it, I couldn't give up. My instincts told me something was wrong, something was different about this guy. The quest to expose him had become something of an obsession.

“Is there a problem, Carol?”

Detective Chief Inspector Baron’s question splintered my internal monologue, his pointed question suggesting that we both already knew the answer.

“No, sir,” I answered, pulling in a deep breath as he peered at me from over his computer screen.

Unable to hold his stare, I glanced absently around his office. I was a damn good cop and had never found myself hauled in front of my superior before, but dedicating every spare moment to Noble’s poor judgment hadn’t gone unnoticed. My case files were mounting, and my results were starting to slide.

“Something in your personal life that I should know about?”

“No, sir.” I sighed, fidgeting in my seat.

“What then?” Straightening, he opened my file and browsed through my commendations. “You’re an excellent officer. Promoted faster than most of your peers, but lately, your head hasn’t been in the game.”

Crap. Was I that transparent?

“Sir...” I paused, struggling to find the right words. How could I tell him that I was resolved to deciphering Walker? There wasn’t even an active case to follow. Noble had dropped all charges against him, and even with his hours of sickening video reels, the C.P.S didn’t have enough to take to court.

“It’s about the Walker-Noble case.”

Baron’s brow furrowed. “Which case?”

“The abduction that started in the victim’s house,” I clarified. “I handled it earlier this year.”

“Oh.” He closed my file. “What about it?”

“I think there are more lines of inquiry to follow up.”

“Really?” His tone was skeptical. “Has something new happened that I’m not aware of?” Evidently not, since it was D.C.I. Baron’s business to know about cases in the area.

“No, sir.” Heat flamed in my cheeks as I was forced to admit the answer.

“Then why the interest, D. S. Lucas?” Baron folded his arms across his chest. “Do we not have enough new cases for you to work on?”

“Yes, sir.”

We had new cases growing by the moment. Crime around the capital had never been so under the political spotlight, and the new Home Secretary had made it his mission to beat the drum louder than most. *Tough on crime. Tough on the causes of crime.* I’d seen the propaganda in the papers. The problem was, the minister wasn’t prepared to back up his fiery agenda with cold, hard cash, and without more officers, we were never going to meet the new government targets.

“So?” He sounded weary as he removed his spectacles and rubbed his temple. “What am I missing?”

“Nothing, sir.” I swallowed, rueful to have caused Baron more stress. He’d always been a decent boss, and I hadn’t intended to rile him. “I’m sorry, you’re right. I’ve taken my eye off the ball where my case load is concerned. I won’t let it happen again.”

“I appreciate the apology, but I’m not sure it’s enough, Carol.”

Enough? My pulse raced faster. What did that mean?

“I need all of my Detective Sergeant’s working at one hundred per cent.” He leaned closer, pressing his elbows into his desk. “Perhaps you need to take a few days? I notice you have three weeks annual leave owed to you.”

“A few days?” Was he suspending me? “Am I in trouble, sir?”

“No.” He shook his hand dismissively. “No, you’re not, Carol. I’m just suggesting that some time away might help to clear your head and ensure that when you return to work, you’re fully prepared and focused on your *current* cases.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to say.

“What do you think?”

What did I think?

“Okay.” Maybe he was right? Perhaps what I needed was a chance to take a breath and get some perspective. “I can take a few days, sir.”

“Good.” He smiled, the first time since I’d sat down. “Let’s say a week, shall we?” Signaling to the screen, he went on. “I’ve already approved the time.”

“A week?” I couldn’t recall the last time I’d taken so much time away from work.

“Yes,” he encouraged. “You could go away, visit some family or friends.”

I hated to tell him but working as hard as I did meant there weren’t too many family or friends left to visit.

“Sounds good.” I feigned a grin, though I suspected he could see right through it.

“Excellent,” he replied. “We’ll see you back on Monday the 20th.”

Wow, Baron really did have this all planned.

“Yes, sir.” I nodded, preparing to stand and leave, but his tone stopped me in my tracks.

“Oh, and D.S. Lucas?”

“Sir?” Peering back over my shoulder, I met his green eyes.

“Make sure this little holiday is effective.” His expression was somber. “When you come back, I need you firing on all cylinders. No more wasting time on old cases and no more

wasting police resources searching for possible connections to Kade Walker.”

“Sir.” I sensed the color drain from my face. So, he knew about all the hours I’d spent scanning files and following up potential leads? “I wouldn’t say wasting resources, I was only —”

“Carol.” His clipped tone interrupted my explanation. “I like you and want to see you thrive, but let’s be clear. This is a chance for a fresh start. I don’t want to hear Walker’s name again unless he has new charges brought against him.”

“Yes, sir.” I’d been around the block enough times to know not to push my superior officer when they took that tone.

“You understand?” His brows knitted as he waited for my answer.

“Yes, sir.” I was starting to sound like a broken record. “Message received and understood.”

“Good.” Tension fell from his shoulders as he leaned back in his chair. “Enjoy your time off.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Opening the door, I walked from his office, ignoring his secretary Shelley as I hit the button for the elevator. If Baron wanted me to take some time away from the office, then I would, but I couldn’t guarantee that he’d approve of my plans. Fortunately, the D.C.I. only had authority over my actions *while* I was working. What I chose to do with my free time was none of his business.

Chapter Four

Tiffany

Standing in front of the mirror, I spun, inspecting myself from another angle.

“I don’t know why you bother, beautiful.” Kade’s chuckle danced around me. “You look incredible whichever way you turn.”

“Thank you, Master.” My lips curled at his compliment, though I didn’t glance in his direction. “But I think you might be a little biased.”

“That’s my prerogative,” he answered. “Though I can’t say I approve of your attire. It covers too much of you.”

“It *is* for work, Master,” I reminded him, smoothing down my skirt. It had been a while since I’d worn anything so formal. I scarcely recognized myself without his collar and other accessories.

“I know.” He sighed. “But even so.”

“You *are* okay with this, aren’t you?”

Whirling to meet his stare, I walked toward him. A part of me still loathed having to ask for permission to do what I loved, but if he was having second thoughts, I wanted to hear about them now and not on Friday morning.

“*Okay* is a strong word.” Stretched out in his leather chair, Kade smiled as I neared. Reaching for me, he beckoned me forward with one finger. “I accept you need work to fulfill you, but do not appreciate the time apart.”

“I understand, Master,” I replied, brushing my hand over his.

“I know you’re going to make me proud, little girl.” His silver eyes shone as they met mine. “You’re going to do an

awesome job for Julia.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Master.”

“Good.” His fingers entwined with mine. “Then, after a long day serving your new mistress, you’ll come back here and serve your master.”

“That’s not quite how it will be in Chambers.” I laughed at how he managed to twist everything to make it sound sexy and immoral. “But yes, Master. I’m still yours.” The muscles at the apex of my legs clenched as I remembered just how much I was his.

“Damn right you are,” he purred. “Now, get out of that outfit. My little whore should be naked.”

“Of course.” Untangling myself from his grasp, I focused on the zipper at the side of my skirt. “Is there anything you’d like to do with the weekend, Master?”

“You.”

I shook my head at his predictable response, glancing back at him. “Anything else?”

“No, little girl.” His tantalizing lips twitched. “I have everything I need right here.” He gestured around the room. “What about you? How are you feeling since you moved in here with me permanently?”

“I’m very happy, Master.” Shrugging the skirt from my hips, I stepped out of the fabric and held it aloft as I reached for the hanger. There was a certain solace in the confession, a recognition that, despite everything Kade and I had been through, we’d carved out a slice of bliss for ourselves within the walls of Barrington. “I like it here.”

“I like it more now that you’re with me,” he answered. “I don’t see so many ghosts waiting around every corner.”

“Master.” Leaving the skirt on the nearby counter, I returned to his side. “I worry about those ghosts.”

“Don’t.” His hand snaked around my backside, squeezing my tender cheeks as he continued. “I’m working through my past.”

“Are you though?” I hadn’t meant to say the words out loud, and my hand rose to cover my mouth as I realized that I had.

“That’s a bold question.” One of his eyebrows arched at my impertinence. “It makes me wonder if I’ve been too lenient on you since you arrived.”

Lenient? I didn’t think so. He’d had me bound and spanked regularly throughout the days. It was part of the rush, the reasons being at Barrington was such a thrill. Kade was a different man there and seeing him in his own environment had revealed so many new aspects to his personality. After everything he knew about me, it was refreshing to learn about him as well, but I hadn’t intended to be quite so blunt.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” I explained in a rush. “I’m sorry, Master. I just meant that we never seem to get much further when we discuss your past.”

“Is that right?” His tone was playful, but the hand gripping my ass suggested penalties to come.

“Yes.” My breathing sped up as I frantically attempted to justify myself. “I want you to be happy, Master. Not haunted by every shadow in the house.”

“I know.” His gaze drilled into me. “That’s because you always want me to talk to somebody else—a professional...” He wrinkled his nose at the thought.

“And that’s not what you want,” I concluded for him.

“Correct,” he replied, patting my rump approvingly. “Before you, I never told anyone, little girl. I’m not comfortable sharing more with a stranger.”

“You didn’t tell *anyone*?” I could barely believe my ears. “Not even your mother?”

Kade had never mentioned his mother, but surely, she would have noticed how withdrawn and terrified her son had become? Surely, she knew the man she'd married.

People never do, do they? I inhaled at the knowing voice in my head. *They make excuses for people. It happens all the time.*

“No,” he confirmed, his stare glassy as he contemplated his past. “My father made it clear that no one would believe me and the repercussions for blabbing would be severe.”

“Oh God,” I replied, pushing the snide commentary aside. “That’s awful, Master.” His father sounded like a monster. No wonder Kade had turned out the way he had.

“I understand if you don’t want to reach out to a professional.” Stroking his shoulder, I coaxed his attention back to me. “But I’d really like it if you’d talk to me.” Apprehension knotted in my belly as he met my eyes, the tangible sense that I had no idea how he’d react taunting me. Would he take umbrage with my plea and punish me, or would he—as I hoped—see it for the genuine concern that it was? If we were to have happiness in the future, we had to release our pasts.

“You would, huh?” His reply gave little away, although the way he caressed my backside went some way to relieve my burgeoning anxiety.

“Y-Yes...” Calming my breathing, I tried to read his expression. “To help you, Master. Well, to help us.”

“To help us?” Pressing into my ass, his hand guided me around the arm of his chair to his knees and for one heart-stopping moment I thought he was going to push me down over his lap. “How so, little girl?”

“Because *we’re* happy if you’re happy.”

My heart was pounding out of control as he tugged me onto his lap. Straddling his muscular form, my legs settled on the edge of his seat. I didn’t have any underwear on and now only my sheer blouse offered me any modesty.

“That’s true.” Smirking, his hands rose to the bottom button of the blouse. I watched in slow motion as he unfastened it before moving to the next. “So, you’re offering to be my therapist of sorts?”

“I-I suppose so, Master.” It was difficult to think clearly as he stripped me, the devils dancing in his eyes confirming he already had other things on his mind. “I just want to help, to be someone you can confide in.”

“You *are* that person.” Fingers pausing at the top button, his gaze seared into me. “I have told you everything.”

“I know.” I gulped, unable to manage the intensity of his stare. “I appreciate that. I just mean that—”

“You just need to stop talking,” he interjected as he flung my blouse open to reveal my beading nipples. “And pay attention to your master’s needs.”

“Yes.”

I wasn’t sure how, but Kade had played his usual trick and managed to morph my serious concern into something dark and sinful. Staring into his eyes, it was obvious it wasn’t conversation he had on his mind, and the worst of it was that the arousal flooding at my core persuaded me I was inclined to agree.

“Good, little girl.” Yanking the blouse back, he trapped my arms in the fabric before his hands shifted to my exposed breasts. Cradling their weight, he caressed my skin, inching in toward my desperate nipples. “I’ll take on board your request and will think about it, but in the meantime, you’re mine.”

I groaned as his mouth closed around my left nipple, suckling on my vulnerable teat until I was ready to beg for more. As though he could read my thoughts, one hand rose to the other breast, tugging my tight bud until I called out.

“Oh God, Master!”

“I know,” he murmured as he came up for air. “I bet you’re as wet as I am hard.” The hand at my ass shifted,

stroking my pussy to discover the truth for himself. “See.” Triumph radiated in his voice. “Fucking soaking.”

“Master.” I had no defense for my body’s responses, no answer except my unmitigated desire for him.

“It’s okay,” he soothed, releasing his cock from his pants. “I’m going to put out those flames, little girl.”

Head falling back, I moaned as he filled me, determined to take every inch that he had to give. From this angle and with his assent, I would be able to enjoy some pleasure for myself.

“Fuck, yes,” he agreed as his hips pushed his cock deeper into me. “You are so amazing.”

“M-Master.” I was already so close. Being kept perpetually on the precipice ensured it never took much stimulation to tip the balance, but who was I kidding? I loved the way he owned me and held my climaxes hostage, the same way he’d once held me. “Please can I come?”

“What’s that?” he replied teasingly. “My little girl needs to come?”

“Yes, please, Master.”

We’d both learned well enough that I wasn’t averse to pleading when the opportunity arose. I’d do whatever he required, each new act of denigration adding fuel to my already twisted fire.

“Beg a little harder then,” he encouraged, slamming his dick into me as I lowered to take more of him. “Show me how much you deserve the reward.”

“Please, Master.” I wasn’t sure how much more I could take before I splintered, and God help me if I came without his consent. Kade might only just be learning how important it was to me, but he’d always been clear about who my orgasms belonged to. “Please let me come.”

“But you’re already so wet,” he goaded, lifting my right breast to his mouth and nipping at my eager bud. “I don’t need

you to come to lubricate that pretty little pussy, do I?”

“No, Master, I...” Lost to the frenzy of our carnality, I couldn’t find the words.

“But you want to come, regardless, eh?” Laughing at my dismay, his hand rose to my hair, fisting my tresses and forcing me into a hard arch.

“Yes, please, Master,” I just managed.

“How long do you think it’ll take you to come apart, little girl?” His hips stilled, his cock pulsating inside me as I struggled to catch my breath.

“N-Not long, Master.” Grinding my hips against him, I trembled, sensing how close I was to the brink.

“Two more thrusts?” he asked, lunging slowly into me. “Three?”

“Oh God,” I gasped. “No more than five, Master.”

“Let’s see then.” The pressure at my scalp diminished as he righted me. “You have five thrusts, little girl, and if you haven’t climaxed by that point then you go to bed unsatisfied.” Steering my head in his direction, his gaze met mine. “Understand?”

“Yes, Master,” I answered at once, not wanting to lose the chance.

“Go on.” He grinned, easing out of me before he slammed back inside. “One.”

“Oh, f...” Stopping myself from swearing, I ground my hips against him, my eyes fluttering closed at the exquisite friction. Forced forward, my clit was at the perfect angle to receive every inch of the stimulation.

“Very good,” he praised, withdrawing before filling me up again. “Two.”

Hips rocking as if my life depended on the motion, I no longer cared how frantic I looked. My degradation was all part of the game, as was the fact my orgasms were his to control.

He would set the bar and I would race to leap over it. That was how it worked, and I rejoiced in every fucking moment.

“Three!”

Contracting around his cock, my body spasmed as the first wave of pleasure ripped through me. Calling out for him, I lurched forward, collapsing onto his shoulder as I grappled with my blouse.

“Excellent,” he purred, resuming his faster pace as I clenched around him. “You made it on three, little girl.”

Slapping my ass approvingly, he grabbed my cheeks with both hands and held me open as he took his fill. Completely at his mercy, I mewled, relishing the fleeting fragments of my pleasure as his loomed. Two fingers slid into my ass as his cadence increased, filling my behind at the same time he possessed my pussy.

“You. Are. So. Fucking. Good,” he grunted as he finally succumbed to the hedonism.

Panting on his shoulder, I sensed his body stiffen as he pumped cum inside of me, his digits curling until guttural noises escaped my throat. We huddled in silence, the sound of our collective breaths the only disturbance as we ceded to the competing sweet sensations.

“There,” he soothed, withdrawing from my bottom before patting it gently. “You were perfect.” Cock still lodged inside my cunt, he chuckled as I squeezed around him.

“I don’t know what to say, Master,” I admitted. “Except thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, kissing the side of my face. “I am grateful for your offer, Tiffany. When I am ready to talk, you will be the first to know.”

Chapter Five

Kade

“Stop fussing, little girl.” Shifting the car into neutral, I glanced sideways to where Tiffany sat. “You look great, and you’re more than ready.”

“Thank you, Master.” Cheeks tinged with heat, she turned to meet my eyes before closing her compact mirror. “I needed to hear that.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I replied, although God only knew why she needed bolstering. Didn’t I tell her every day how much she meant to me and how she’d changed everything for the better? Didn’t my every gesture demonstrate my devotion? “I’ll be here later when your day is finished.”

“At five o’clock,” she clarified as she shoved her mirror into her purse.

“That’s right.”

“Though I don’t know for sure what time I’ll leave, Master.” Her chest rose and fell faster as she tried to explain. “It’s my first day, so I might need to play things by ear, and—”

“I’ll be waiting, regardless,” I reassured. “You need to be back in the car by five minutes past five o’clock.”

She already knew the consequences of every five minutes she kept me past her deadline. I’d reinforced the rules often enough over the weekend, but I couldn’t resist mentioning them again.

“There’ll be ten swats with my paddle for every delay.”

“But Master!” She flustered. “I might have to stay. I can’t just walk out if there’s a meeting or—”

“I understand.” My palm rose in a gesture of conciliation. It was as apologetic as I got. “I won’t be upset if you’re

delayed, but I also want to ensure you know what the ramifications will be for your pretty backside.”

Tiffany shifted on her seat. “You’re not playing fair, Master.”

“No,” I agreed, reaching for her hand and squeezing gently. “I’m not, but then I never do.” Of all people in the world, Tiffany should know that.

“True.” Her lips curled.

“Now, go in there and smash it.” Nodding, I motioned toward the huge black door of her new workplace.

“Thank you.” She mouthed the words to me, her growing nerves evident from her tiny fidgety movements. “I’ll see you at five o’clock, Master.”

“Yes, you will, little girl.” I smiled as she checked the path before opening the door and stepping out into the cool air.

My gaze loitered on the door long after Tiffany had walked through it, my emotions tinged with both sadness and pride. I’d seen the way she dealt with both the police and defense teams in the past and knew how good she was at her job, but I couldn’t deny the pang of sorrow that resonated as she disappeared from sight. She had gone back to work, back to a life without me, and even though I recognized it was selfish and preposterous to want her to myself, the thought still lingered, highlighting how little else there was in my life.

I had Barrington, the huge house and the grounds, but all of my focus had been on Tiffany—on retrieving and wooing her—and I hadn’t thought past this moment to what waited beyond. Staring at the busy street ahead, it was all clear. She would have a healthy and happy professional life while my existence revolved around only her.

“Stop brooding,” I muttered, glancing at my side mirror. On the other side of the street and a few vehicles behind, a blue car briefly caught my attention before my gaze flitted away. “You’re damn lucky to have anything.”

Pulling into the line of traffic, I accepted I was right. Not so long ago, I had no home and had lost the woman I adored. Now, both problems were rectified, and despite my callous behavior and murderous streak, Tiffany was not only mine, but we were happy. I was one lucky son-of-a-bitch.

The house would keep me occupied. Despite the renovation, there was still a lot I wanted to change. I wouldn't rest until every trace of my father had been wiped from each surface. Talking through my childhood trauma was one thing, but constantly being reminded of it was another. I'd kept the wood-paneling because it was easier and less time consuming than replacing it but living with its legacy was proving much more challenging. Every time I grasped a banister or bent my little girl over a counter for punishment, I was reminded of its genesis—a cruel man with a penchant for his son. My stomach twisted at the unsettling truth.

Blowing out a breath, I turned left onto the main road. Perhaps Tiffany was right, and I did need to speak to someone. I'd spent the weekend diverting her whenever she'd mentioned talking about my father, mainly because even the thought of him was enough to make me want to scream, but how sustainable was my approach? We were living in his old house for God's sake. I had to accept that my inheritance was more than money, more than only bricks and mortar—it was recognizing the things he'd done and how those acts had impacted me. It was learning to forgive.

My fingers tightened on the wheel. I could never forgive that bastard for what he'd done to me, for the way he'd torn me up inside, belittling, then destroying the person I'd been, but at the same time, I accepted Tiffany's advice. Our future depended upon me burying the ghosts roaming Barrington's halls.

Swallowing down my rising unease, I glanced in the rear-view mirror. A stream of vehicles drove behind me on the highway, some overtaking while others held back. My gaze scanned the line of cars, my brow creasing as I noticed one that looked eerily familiar to the vehicle I'd seen outside

Tiffany's new Chambers. Checking the road ahead quickly, I stared in the mirror again, reading the registration plate. It wasn't someone I knew, yet I couldn't shake the nagging sense that it was the same blue car I'd seen before.

"It's nothing," I vowed, but deep down, I knew it wasn't.

The chances of the same car taking the identical route weren't that slim, but I still didn't like it. When it came to covert games, I had played every one in the book and recognized a tail when I saw one. Ignoring my own vocalized response, I decided to trust my intuition and assume the worst. Someone was following me, although I didn't know who, but there was a long list of potential candidates. It was possible someone had discovered my secrets and knew about the murders, possible that someone wanted revenge of their own. I had to be smart and play it safe—for Tiffany's sake as much as my own.

Driving past the exit that would take me to Barrington, I headed west, eventually turning into a rest area. Killing my engine, I watched as the blue car pulled in behind me, parking far enough away so as not to attract attention, but it was too late—the unknown driver already had mine.

Looking harder into the reflection, I could just make out the outline of a woman. Probably in her forties, she looked tired as she glanced out of the window, making a show of her apparent indifference.

"Who are you?" I asked as I stared at the stranger. "What do you know and what do you want?"

I still had no way of knowing for sure that she was following me, but I'd already made up my mind. The woman in the blue car needed to be dealt with.

Chapter Six

D.S. Lucas

I'd been a police officer for more years than I wanted to remember. Too many years. Enough years to have learned to trust my instincts and watching Walker, my internal alarms were all sounding. I saw the way he looked at Noble, the possessive manner with which his arm snaked around her and as I walked by his car as they sat together, I acknowledged the dark gleam in his eyes.

It was the same glint I'd seen on the hours of video recordings he'd taken in her house, many of which included him. The same insidious glance that had haunted me and should have warned her.

Closing the distance to my car and settling in the front seat, I watched as she made her way inside. I knew what waited for her there—the building was a well-known local Chambers. Knowing she worked in public prosecutions had made it easy to track down her application and discover its location. So, she'd decided to start working again? That was good, but why was such a smart woman acquiescing to a man like Walker? Clearly, she didn't need the money, and based on what she'd told me, she got her life back together after the abduction. What did he have over her that kept her coming back for more?

Returning to him, my gaze burned into the back of his head, my pulse quickening as he steered the car into the line of traffic between us. Responding, I started my engine, and followed, ensuring I stayed out of sight but could still keep an eye on my target. I tailed Walker for miles, determined to find out where he and Noble were basing themselves.

The police's files on him were frustratingly limited. Before his run-in with Noble, he'd never been in trouble, let

alone convicted. We had no history on him, no known addresses, and thanks to his escape before arrest, no DNA. Walker was like a ghost, a man who seemed to live on another celestial plane outside the law, but that didn't put me off. His apparent perfect reputation before Pennsylvania Avenue only fueled my interest. I knew for a fact what he was capable of and still had the feeling if I delved deep enough, I'd uncover his proven track record in criminality.

We drove for miles, only pausing when he pulled into a secluded rest area.

“Just like the sort where a killer might take his victims.”

I'd been to enough brutal crime scenes to know I was right, though I still had nothing concrete on Walker, save for the recordings he'd taken in Noble's house. Evidence that, sadly, wouldn't be admissible unless she chose to press charges.

Crawling past his car, I found a spot up ahead to park, checking my rear-view mirror to ensure I didn't lose him.

“Who are you really?” I muttered, reaching for my purse and fiddling inside until I found an old lipstick. I had no desire to paint my face but pretending to do so gave me the ideal reason to stare at the mirror a little longer. “I know what our files say, but I also know there's more to the story.”

Angling the glass, I slid the lipstick into action before staring into the mirror once more. It took a second for my brain to decipher the black leather of the empty seat I was seeing. Walker was gone. *Shit, he was gone!* Heart racing, my gaze traveled around his car, unable to find him. Where the hell had he gone? I'd only looked away for a moment. Dropping the makeup, I reached for the door release. His car was still there, so he couldn't have gone far. I just had to play it cool and track him down, had to—

My thoughts scattered as I registered someone blocking my exit, someone dressed in dark clothes who'd seemingly appeared from nowhere. I watched in horror as a hand came

into view, one long finger tapping on my window. Pulling in a breath, I fought to compose myself. If this was Walker—and since the rest area was otherwise empty, who else could it be—then I had to stay calm. I couldn't afford to give myself away. He didn't know who I was. Walker had never met me—I'd never had the pleasure of interviewing the slimy bastard—so there was no reason to panic. Waiting until his hand drew away, I opened the door, forcing him to retreat a few paces. Whatever he wanted, I intended to meet him head-on.

“I'm sorry to bother you.” Throwing his hands into the air, he backed away with what some might have described a boyish grin.

“No problem.” Coercing my lips into a smile, I met his gray eyes. I'd seen them many times before in various scandalous scenes, but he had never seen me. “Can I help you?”

“Actually, I was going to see if I could help you,” he explained as his arms fell by his side. “I noticed you over here and thought you might be in trouble.” Glancing around theatrically, his gaze returned to me. “After all, a woman on her own in a lonely place like this...” He shrugged. “Might not be safe.”

“I'm fine, thank you.” My tone lowered though I hadn't intended it to. The problem was I'd spent my entire career dealing with low lifes like Walker. I could see through his façade in a heartbeat. “How kind of you to offer, though.”

“No problem.” Lips curling, his hand rose to his face, pushing the strands of his dark tousled hair from his eyes. “I hate to think of a lady in distress.”

Was this guy having a laugh?

Comments like that made me wonder if he didn't realize who I was, but I had to be rational. I knew he'd never laid eyes on me before. Walker was only feigning his interest, the same way he no doubt invented the character Noble had fallen for.

Everything about him told me he was a professional at this, that he'd been playing women at the same game for years.

“Well, honestly if you don't mind, I could use directions.”

I wasn't much of an actress but had been taught plenty of ways to untangle myself from similar tricky situations. Technically, this wasn't police business, but I could still draw on my experiences to help me.

“Really?” His brow rose, as if he hadn't been expecting my reply.

“Please.” Taking a step toward him, I did my best to seem seductive rather than suspicious. Men like Walker saw women as sexual playthings, so this was my best shot at making him malleable. “I was looking for somewhere local to eat but haven't seen anywhere since before the highway. Do you know the area?”

“No.” He glanced around as though the answer to some unspoken question could be found in the air around us. “I don't live around here.”

“Oh,” I answered, working hard to dampen the swell of excitement burgeoning in my chest. Walker had just made his first mistake but was too arrogant to realize it yet. “Okay, no problem. Guess I'll head back to the main road and keep looking.”

“Won't your satellite navigation help you?” Motioning behind me into the car, his tone was pointed.

“That old thing?” Forcing laughter, I closed the door with my foot, cursing myself for not having the foresight to do so earlier. I didn't think I'd left anything pertaining to his case on the front seat but couldn't be certain. “It's not that useful. It barely keeps up with the road changes.”

“You need an upgrade.” His lips twitched knowingly, the tiny gesture twisting the knot of anxiety throbbing in my belly.

“What about you?” I asked, signaling to his vehicle in a frantic attempt to distract him. “Your car looks newer. Do you

have a sat nav that can help?”

“Sure.” Turning to his car, he motioned for me to lead the way. “I’m happy to look for you.”

“Thank you,” I enthused, wishing I’d put my taser in my pocket instead of leaving it in the glove compartment. Heart pounding, I wandered from my sanctuary toward his car.

“Are you looking for a service station?” His expression was serious as he opened the door and slipped into the front seat. “Or somewhere more bohemian?”

“A service station is good, thanks.” I waited as he started the engine and powered up his system, trying to absorb as much information as I could about him, the vehicle and anything else that captured my attention. “I really appreciate this.”

“No problem,” he replied absently. “I’d hate to think of my wife lost out here on her own and I’m sure you have someone who’d worry about you, too.” Turning back to look at me, his silver gaze settled on my left hand, presumably deciding for himself that there was no husband waiting at home before his focus returned to the screen. “It looks as though there’s a service station about fifteen miles from here.” He pointed to the map on his dashboard. “You’ll have to go back to the highway and head south.”

“Fifteen miles,” I repeated, drawing closer and staring at the inside of his car. “Thanks.”

As far as I could see, everything seemed normal, but then why wouldn’t it? However Walker had managed to ensnare Noble this time, there was no suggestion he’d used illegal means. According to her old boss, she’d returned of her own accord.

“Anything else I can help you with?” Shifting to the edge of his seat, the full weight of those gray eyes landed on me, acknowledging how close I’d inched to his car.

“No, I...”

Flustered, I took a step back as he rose to his full height. Since he'd sprung this little diversion on me, I didn't really have a plan about how I'd handle the proceedings, but looming over him while he sat in his driver's seat was surely not a good option. Although it wasn't my style, a little flirtation had never hurt, but I didn't want to give him the wrong impression. A predator like Walker might take my inch and raise me a mile...

"I'm good, thank you."

"Well, you're welcome." His lips curled. "Have a safe onward journey."

"Right." Nodding, I backed toward my car, too worried to turn around.

Leaning on the edge of his car door, he watched my retreat, his expression suggesting he was resisting the urge to laugh. Heart hammering in my chest, I finally reached my vehicle, sliding into its relative shelter and locking the door. What the hell had just happened? Why would Walker approach me unless he knew who I was or at least that something was wrong?

"Stop it," I complained, throwing my lipstick back into my purse as I switched on the engine. "He doesn't know anything."

Even as I maneuvered from the parking space and crawled past him, I knew I was wrong. Walker *did* know. He might not have understood who I was or what I represented, but he knew a threat when he saw one. He raised one hand as I passed by, offering me that same insincere smile, and unthinkingly, I did the same.

Like it or not, I hadn't helped myself. Walker was onto me. It was only a matter of time before he put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Chapter Seven

Tiffany

Checking my watch, I hurried from my office and down the corridor. After a long first day, with all the associated nervous energy of meeting new people and getting my bearings, I was all too conscious that my master would be waiting for me, and much though I loved his penances, I wasn't sure I had the energy tonight.

"Tiffany."

Halting at a female voice, I spun on my heel to find my boss, Julia, behind me.

"Oh, hi."

Shifting from one foot to the other, I tried not to overthink how poorly my desire to rush away must look on day one. I had partially explained my reasoning already, telling her I had personal commitments that needed attention after five o'clock. Julia hadn't asked, assuming I suppose that I had children or someone else to care for, but even so, she might have expected me to stick around on my first day.

"How was your day?" she asked as she approached.

"Really good, thank you," I gushed, ignoring the way my heart sped up as the nearby clock proclaimed the passing seconds. "I stopped by your office earlier to let you know but couldn't find you."

"I've been in meetings." She nodded. "But wanted to catch up with you."

Shit, not now! My gaze darted to the clock that was marching happily away to my right. I'd left my office dead on five, but it was already close to five past the hour. If Julia

wanted to talk now, God only knew when I'd be out of there and what that would mean for my poor backside.

"Do you mind if we touch base on Monday morning?" Anxiety twisted inside as I asked my new boss for a reprieve. "I really have to get going now."

"Oh, of course." She smiled, every inch the professional, but I could only imagine what she was thinking beneath the surface. *First day on the job and you can't even be bothered to stick around and discuss how things have gone? Not exactly the best first impression.* "I remember you have to run. Sure, we'll talk then."

"Thank you so much." I was going to have to work my ass off to impress her after this, but the thing was, I really didn't mind. I loved my job and sensed I could thrive under Julia. "I appreciate it."

"It's good to have you on board." She motioned toward the door. "Now, please, don't let me keep you."

"I'll see you then, Julia," I answered. "Thank you again."

Turning, I headed for the exit, painfully aware of my heels clicking on the stone floor. My heart pounded frantically as I pulled the huge door open, trapped as I was between the attention of my employer and the man who had well and truly mastered me. Somehow, I would have to find a balance between their needs, and clearly, it was going to take some practice.

"There you are."

Blinking at the sudden deluge of sunlight, I gripped the handrail and headed down the steps toward his voice. "Master? Are you okay?" I kept my voice low, conscious that any of my colleagues could be within earshot, as I lifted my palm to shield my eyes. There he was, leaning against the wall, waiting for me. "I didn't expect you to be here."

What *was* Kade doing there? We'd arranged to meet in the car.

“I didn’t expect you to be late on day one.”

Shit, he didn’t sound happy, but the expression on his face suggested he was only being playful, and this might just be another case of testing my boundaries and keeping me on my toes.

“My boss wanted to talk to me.” I stopped a few inches from where he stood, craning my head to look at his face. “To ask how my day had gone.”

“And?” One dark brow arched provocatively. “How did my little girl’s day go?”

“Master!” I chastised in a whisper, glancing around for evidence someone had heard him. “Not here.”

“Yes, here,” he corrected, collecting my chin with one finger and guiding my attention. “Everywhere, little girl.”

My eyes fluttered closed at his verdict, the part of me that had been so tense and anxious ceding to his will. That was what Kade did so perfectly—he came in and took charge, deciding what was appropriate and what wasn’t. After everything we had been through, I should have known better than to question his authority on such a trivial matter. I *was* his little girl wherever we were. It was what I craved more than anything else.

“Yes.” Moving from his hand, I kissed the tip of his finger. “I’m sorry, Master. You’re right.”

“Forgiven,” he murmured as his other hand slid around my middle and guided me away. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

“It was a good first day.” I sighed, conscious of some of the pressure slipping from my shoulders. “Thank you. I think I’m going to be happy there.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He steered me to the car and opened the passenger door, waiting as I climbed inside.

Relaxing into the leather seat, I unhooked my purse from my shoulder and pulled the safety belt over my body as he slid

into the driver's position. Closing his door, he moved his hair from his face as he turned in my direction.

"Of course, there's still the matter of your penalty for being late." His gray eyes bored into me as his lips curled.

"I wasn't very late, Master." I don't know why I bothered countering him, and my accelerating pulse concurred with the futility. Kade had made his terms clear, and I'd agreed to them. He would give me five minutes to get from my desk to the car, and glancing at the clock on his dashboard, I could see it was already ten past five. "And you met me by the steps, so the clock should stop there and not now."

"Oh, you're telling me how the rules work now, are you?"

Once more, his tone was teasing, but sensing the edgy undercurrent, the muscles of my sex clenched at his unspoken promise. He was going to punish me, and I would concede—as I always did.

"No, Master." Glancing back to the building where I worked, I sensed the heat growing in my cheeks. "That's not what I meant."

"Good..." His voice trailed away as he started the engine, and the sound of the car's fan filled the air. "I waited in the car until our agreed time, then waited for you outside. It was seven minutes past five by the time you joined me—two minutes past the time we agreed."

"Ten swats then, Master?" Shifting on the leather, I watched as he joined the queue of cars, my question lingering in the air between us.

"I'm feeling lenient," he replied without meeting my gaze. "Since it's your first day, and you didn't quite run over by the full five minutes."

Lenient? That was a first!

"There will be eight strikes," he went on. "With the implement of my choice."

"Okay, Master."

What was that in my voice—relief? How far had my life changed that I now not only acknowledged the man as my master but was relieved when he didn't pursue the punishment he'd promised? I might have the same name and face, but almost every other aspect of my existence had altered under Kade's tutelage.

"I *am* glad you had a good day, little girl." One of his giant palms left the wheel and reached for my thigh, ducking underneath my skirt and squeezing. "I knew you would."

"Thank you." I swallowed as his hand edged further up my leg, aware of my nipples beading beneath my professional attire. "How was your day, Master?"

If I didn't distract him, I was going to be a desperate mess by the time we reached Barrington House—an objective I was sure he was intent on accomplishing.

"Interesting," he purred as one of his fingertips brushed over the fabric of my panties. "Legs apart."

"Interesting?" I repeated, sensing the heat diffusing through my body as I slowly obeyed and splayed my thighs wider. "What does that mean, Master?"

"I missed you." His voice had deepened to that gravelly growl that provoked the obedient whore in me. "A lot."

"Master," I panted, arching my back before pushing my pulsing clit against his digit. "You have to drive and haven't answered my question."

"Little girl," he snarled, grazing the edge of his fingernail over my sensitive nub. "Contrary to what people say, some men can multitask."

"Yes, Master." It was fucking useless arguing with him, and I didn't know why I was even trying. I'd missed him as well. It was the longest time I'd been without him for weeks.

"But to answer you, I was followed today."

"Followed?" Straightening at his reply, I pushed myself onto his hand. "By whom, Master?"

“I’m not sure.” His focus flitted to me fleetingly as his hand began to move, rubbing against my clit until I moaned. “She thought she was being inconspicuous, which suggests some kind of training. A private detective, maybe, or perhaps the police?”

“The police?”

The weight of all my competing emotions was becoming difficult to manage. Concern surfaced at his experiences, but at the same time, all I could think about was the insistent caress of his left hand.

“Maybe.” The sly smirk on his face conveyed just how much he knew he affected me. “As I said, I’m not certain.”

“Did you get a good look at her?”

Christ, much more of this and I was going to topple. Kade had played with me multiple times in the car, but there was something especially naughty about being his little girl while I was dressed for work, as though the collision of my two worlds had the potential to take me higher than ever before.

“Absolutely,” he breathed, gripping the wheel with his free hand. “I spoke to her.”

“Oh.” It was getting difficult to think straight. “Master, please.”

“No,” he answered with a chuckle. “You can’t come in the car, little girl. You were late, remember?”

“Oh yes,” I gasped as his fingers eased my panties aside and brushed over my needy pussy. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” His laughter echoed around the vehicle. “I accept your apology, but no pleasure until after your penance.”

“Yes.” Squeezing my eyes closed, I tried to will the growing hedonism away, but with his goading fingers still in place, that seemed impossible.

“That’s enough.” His tone was harder, a warning of the strike that swatted my clit only a few seconds later.

“Oww!” I whined, though, in truth, I’d have begged for more if I’d thought he’d have allowed it.

“I need both hands to drive safely.” Withdrawing from my sex, the fingers that had taunted me tightened on the steering wheel. “Lift your skirt, little girl,” he instructed, although his gaze remained fixed on the road.

“Like this, Master?” I asked, hiking the fabric to reveal my flesh. I missed his touch already.

“Yes,” he replied without glancing my way. “And keep those legs apart. I want to smell how horny you are for me while I drive.”

Chapter Eight

Kade

“Bend over the desk,” I growled, ensuring Tiffany’s compliance before turning back to my choice of implements.

I’d have normally taken her straight to the monochrome room I’d designed with this in mind, but there was something powerfully erotic about having her half-naked and sprawled across my office desk.

“While you wait, you can tell me why you’re here with your panties around your ankles and your ass exposed and vulnerable.”

“I was late, Master.”

There was no hesitation in her confession and no desire to deny the charges against her. Once upon a time, I’d have had to bind and coerce her into position, but since coming to Barrington, she seemed to have reached a peace with our dynamic. Tiffany was there with me because she wanted to be, because she’d tried the alternative and recognized this version of her life was sweeter. Of course, there was also the fact that I’d drugged and recaptured her... I smirked at the memory as my fingers grazed over the paddle of my choice. It was true I’d taken her without consent, but every moment since had been down to her. My little girl longed to be strewn over my study furniture.

“That’s right,” I agreed, as paddle in hand, I strode toward her. “You were late.” Reaching her delectable ass, I paused, running my fingertip over its inviting curve. “You knew my terms before you started your new role, and on day one, you broke them.”

She inhaled as if she sought to disagree, but no complaints escaped her lips.

“We both know you’re guilty.” Damn it, but I couldn’t help the glee in my voice. If I was honest, I’d secretly hoped for this outcome, praying that she’d mess up and land herself in trouble. Looming over her, all I could think was that I was the luckiest bastard in the world—to have her, hold her and get to spank her glorious backside.

“Yes, Master.” She sighed softly, her fingers relaxing on the wood by her head. “Please punish me.”

Arousal pooled at my groin, my cock swelling until it strained against the prison of my pants. In all my years, I’d never known a woman as damn sexy or alluring as Tiffany. We were truly made for one another.

“Oh, I will little girl.” Cupping her cheeks, my palm brushed over her damp sex, and her frantic whimper only heightened my need. “Eight strikes with my paddle.”

It didn’t sound like many, but I didn’t intend to be gentle. I wanted to deliver a penance that reminded Tiffany every time she sat down tomorrow.

“Yes, Master.” Pressing her palms into the desk, she pulled in a breath, steeling herself as I swapped my hand for the hard surface of the paddle.

“Legs further apart.”

Not that it really mattered, but I did so love to humiliate and knew just how desperate the command would make her.

“But my panties, Master?” Twisting, she tried to signal to her feet. “I can’t separate them.”

“Let me help you.”

Falling to my haunches, I rested the paddle against her ankle as I eased the lacy fabric from her other leg, unhooking it from her office heels. The panties sprung back to her standing leg, where they would stay until I tore them away later. Gripping the handle of my favorite black paddle, I rose to my full height.

“There.” Tapping the implement gently against her ass, I went on. “Now, spread them.”

She obeyed wordlessly, splaying her ankles as far as she could and arching her back to reveal more of her sumptuous sex.

Fuck. The word bounced around my head as I took in the sight of her. Much more of this provocation and I wouldn’t make it to the second swat, let alone the eighth.

“A warning, little girl.” Lifting the paddle, I traced an invisible line along her spine. “These will not be easy for you.”

“Y-Yes, Master.”

There—the first trace of trepidation in her tone.

“I want to send you a lesson about what happens when you keep me waiting...” Pausing, I allowed my words to hover over her before I went on. “That there will always be consequences for your choices.”

If anyone should already know, it was Tiffany.

“I understand, Master.” Turning, she rested her face toward me on the cool wood. “I won’t ask for mercy.”

Good, because you won’t be granted it.

“Eight then.” Our gazes locked briefly before my attention returned to my target. “Count them for me.”

Bringing the paddle smashing down against her upturned ass, I waited as the noise of the strike reverberated through the air. Her gasp drew my focus to her face and triumph raced through me as I acknowledged her knitted brow. The paddle had done its job.

“One, Master.” She blew out the breath she’d been holding.

“Yes, that was one.” Yet already a delicate pink hue was visible where the implement had impacted her delicate skin. “Are you ready for the next?”

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

Good enough. Taking aim, I landed the second swat, putting a fraction more effort in than the first.

“How many?” I demanded.

“Two, Master.”

Tiffany’s eyes were squeezed closed, her fingers balled into small fists by her face. Evidently, she was finding the blows difficult to manage, which was precisely the point.

“Good girl,” I offered, although my tone was clipped.

She would receive all my praise once the deed was done, but caught in the midst of her rapture, all I could think about was how best to make each remaining strike count.

“The next two are coming on your right cheek, little girl.” Shifting closer to take aim, I lifted the paddle, and spanked the delicious orb hard in fast succession.

“Oh God,” she panted, burying her face on the wood between her hands as her feet danced below. “Three and four, but that hurts, Master.”

“Yes.” Removing the paddle, I stroked her reddening flesh. “That’s the crux of this, Tiffany. Now, the left side.”

Turning my attention to her other cheek, I smacked her with the same intensity, relishing the desperate cry that bled from her mouth.

“Five and six.” Face down over my desk, her words were muffled. “Master, please!”

“Don’t even think about begging me for compassion, little girl.” I shook my head in silent disgust. “You knew what you were getting into.”

“But they’re so painful,” she mewled, once more adjusting her feet in a futile attempt to assuage the onslaught.

“It’s a short, sharp shock.” Resting my palm on her ass, she inhaled, clearly struggling to keep still. “You’ll thank me

for the final two, and if you take the swats well, perhaps...” My hand slid between her legs, cupping and squeezing her pussy. “You’ll be rewarded.”

“Master...” Her croaky tone suggested that even the promise of pleasure might not be enough. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Oh, you can, little girl.” I’d told her it often enough, yet still she needed to hear it. “You’ll take the strikes, and if you delay me further, I’ll add two more for good measure.”

“Please.” Her body stiffened at the threat. “I’ll be good, but no more.”

Leaning over her, I brushed my lips over the cooling skin of her lower back, ignoring the eager thrum of my cock. I would have to wait for satisfaction, just as she would.

“Stick that gorgeous ass out as far as you can,” I commanded as I straightened, watching as she shifted her position to please me. “Now, stay that way. No moving between strikes.”

“Oh God,” she moaned, clawing at the desk. “Master, I —”

The weight of the paddle ended her sentence, drowning out her words and morphing them into an agonized cry.

“Name the count,” I reminded her, brushing the paddle up the length of her leg as she grappled with the intensity.

“Seven, Master.”

“And?” I prompted, getting tired of having to remind her of the basics.

“Thank you, Master.”

I’d pushed Tiffany to her limits on numerous occasions but had rarely seen her so close to the edge. If I’d allowed her the option to tap out, I had no doubt she’d be pleading to take it—but there was no safeword in our relationship. Tiffany was

mine, and I would drive her straight to the brink before hauling her back into my arms.

“One more.”

It was supposed to be a reassuring prompt, but the anguished sob that left her throat suggested otherwise.

“Your ass is a fabulous color, little girl.”

I ran my palm over her punished cheeks, enjoying her wince. My tightening balls ordered that I abandon the plan and simply lunge my dick into her wet folds, but I resisted. Tiffany’s punishment had to be finished properly. It was important for us both.

Blowing out a breath, I brought the paddle crashing down for the final time, dropping it to the carpet below as she screamed for relief.

“Thank you, Master,” she hissed. “That was eight.”

“Good girl,” I enthused, folding myself over her body and nuzzling her neck.

“Ow!” she mewled as the front of my pants brushed over her sore behind. “Ow, ow, ow!”

“Shhh,” I soothed. “Your Master’s going to make it all better.”

“Master.” I sensed the moment she stopped struggling, her face turning toward me and one of her hands rising to grasp my hair as I kissed her sensitive skin.

“I know,” I cajoled, twisting to see her tear-stained face. “It’s over, little girl.”

“I didn’t mean to let you down.” Watery blue eyes met mine, torn between the obvious pain of her penance and the emotion that surged for me.

“You didn’t,” I reassured. “You merely overstepped the line, but it’s okay—I was here to chastise you, wasn’t I?”

“Yes.” Her lips curled as she acknowledged the truth of my words.

“I’ll always be here.” Kissing the side of her face I rose, easing her up from her place over my desk. Snaking my arms around her waist, I drew her against me, holding her close as I continued. “To punish and please you.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she nodded. “Thank you, Master.”

“See how your submission affects me?” I goaded, guiding one of her tiny hands to my rock-hard cock.

“Master.” Chuckling, she turned in my arms. “I want you, too.”

“And you shall have me,” I promised her. “Just as soon as you’ve touched the sky.”

Chapter Nine

Lucas

Sipping my coffee, I glanced out at the leaden sky. The recent deluge had left the streets soaked, but the heavens still seemed heavy with rain.

“Can I get you anything else?” The young server interrupted my thoughts, his eager expression conveying how badly he needed my tip.

“Not at the moment, thanks,” I replied as sweetly as I could muster. “I’ll let you know.”

“Sure thing.” Feigning a smile, he wandered away, though his disappointment was obvious.

I knew how the poor lad felt. I’d been unsettled ever since my run-in with Walker and knowing I could hardly start tailing him again immediately, but having zero other leads, had found myself hours later in this roadside café.

He was on to me. That much was clear. Walker didn’t know I was the D.S. who’d investigated his grievous violation of Noble’s privacy, but he wasn’t a complete idiot. The way he’d approached me told me he suspected I was more than only an innocuous passerby, and that presented a problem. Not only did he now know my car, but he would recognize my face if I turned up outside Noble’s Chambers.

In fact, given that he was the kind of man who thought it was acceptable to break in and hide in someone else’s property before taking them hostage in their own home, he would likely be looking over his shoulder for a while. That would mean making progress increasingly difficult with the few days I had away from work.

“Bugger,” I muttered, slamming the cup down on the table.

Looking around the café, I realized that several other patrons had noticed my outburst, and heart racing, I met their perplexed stares. For a cop, I didn't seem to be good at staying inconspicuous. It was fast becoming an issue.

“There has to be something,” I murmured, wrapping my palms around the coffee cup. “Something I'm missing. Come on, Carol. Think...”

Walker was the key to this case. He'd initiated the crime with his perverse desires, and I was sure he was still pulling the strings. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on everything I knew about him. He had no prior convictions, no doubt because he was the type of slimy bastard who had either escaped justice or eased himself through the gaps in reasonable doubt.

What kind of man could achieve that?

In all my years working for the service, I'd met them all, every variety of guy—from the callous low-life to the privileged prick whose money bought them impunity. Which one was Walker?

The question sparked an idea in my head, and opening my eyes, I reached into my bag for my laptop and powered up the device. My ability to access confidential police records was limited outside of work, but I could still use basic searches. So, Walker didn't have a police record, but he was a citizen—there must be some information about him out there. Kade was hardly a common name. I bet if I explored outside of his probable criminality, I'd discover something and maybe—if I was lucky—an address.

Pulse quickening, I moved my coffee out of the way and searched for his name. The results were depressingly sketchy. There were limited accounts of anyone with his identity, save for government records. Brow furrowing, I considered my options. Technically, I shouldn't explore any further without a reasonable cause, ideally evidence which placed him in a new crime, but I couldn't fight the nagging feeling that needed closer scrutiny. Even if Noble had somehow fallen in love with

the devil, it didn't excuse his misconduct or remove the possibility that he'd dabbled in wrongdoing in the past.

"Fuck it," I whispered, clicking on his national insurance number and searching his details. "I have to know."

Baron wouldn't like it, but accessing a private network meant he'd never be able to trace the search. What the D.C.I. didn't know wouldn't hurt him. My exploration revealed a little more data—a picture of a person who appeared to have grown up with good fortune. Educated at Oxford, with a list of prep schools beforehand, he'd either been the top one per cent of his class who'd earned a scholarship, or his parents had been able to buy him a place at the institutions. A quick scan of his childhood address gave me the likely answer.

"Barrington House?" I snorted, shaking my head in disdain.

For fuck's sake, it sounded like some fictional country manor! But as I looked closer, my heart sped up again. The aforementioned childhood home wasn't far from the café where I was sitting and was even closer to the rest area where he'd approached me. If there was one thing my career as a cop had taught me, it was coincidences rarely existed. If this country house was local, it was meaningful.

Perhaps, it was the place Walker had returned to, and—if I was super fortunate—the same one he'd taken Noble to?

If I could find the elusive Barrington House, I had a new target. Somewhere I could watch and wait. Reaching for my phone, I took a photo of the address. It had to be worth a shot. I had no other leads and frankly, nowhere else to be. I'd take a trip to Barrington and see what I found.

An hour later, with dusk falling, I crawled along the country road that my sat nav insisted was the right direction. Looking around, though, I was inclined to disagree. I was in the middle of nowhere, about to drive into a bloody lake in the half-light. Maneuvering the car to perform a U-turn, I was just about to give up when lights appeared on the horizon.

Straining to see through the impending darkness, I drove on, looking closer. It took another minute of driving at five miles an hour before the outline of an enormous house came into view, the lights I'd seen illuminating from various huge windows through the property.

“Jesus.” Sitting back in my seat, I assessed the size of the building. “Barrington House.”

If this was the wealth that Walker had come from, no wonder he had the ability to disappear, combined no doubt with an arrogance only the rich emanated. However depressing the reality was, it was still true that money bought you more than just material possessions in the United Kingdom. Even in this day and age, it was well known it also delivered power and influence. If Walker had the cash along with the country house, he could have purchased enough of both to protect him from prosecution.

Anxious not to draw any unwelcome attention, I turned off my headlights and parked the car beneath the canopy of an aging oak. Grabbing my taser from the glove compartment, I locked the car and ensured the keys were tucked safely away. Whatever the next chapter in the Barrington adventure brought, I would go the rest of the way on foot.

Chapter Ten

Tiffany

“Oh f—” Biting my lip, I stopped myself from swearing as his crop finally relented, ebbing away the precipice that had loomed.

“That good, eh?” Kade smirked, lifting the tongue to inspect it for himself, but there was no need. I already knew what he would discover. I was soaking with need, and every tap of the crop only exacerbated my desperation.

“Yes, Master,” I moaned, glancing left and right as I pulled against my ropes. “I’m so close.”

“Excellent,” he purred, pressing himself against me before his free hand rose to my throat. “That is exactly how you will stay until I say otherwise.”

“Yes, Master.”

I understood this game of old. Kade owned my orgasms, and it would take more than God to help me if I disobeyed him by coming without permission. I knew it and loved it, but that didn’t make the sweet excruciation of play any easier to tolerate.

He’d had me like this for what seemed like an age. My gaze flitted to his desk, the place he’d bent me over and paddled me earlier, but despite how sore my ass was, I could scarcely even recall the pain. He’d carried me to the doorway, where he’d stripped me fully and secured my wrists into waiting ropes. My brow creased as I tried to remember if I’d noticed the course loops hanging there before tonight. Perhaps they’d been there, and I’d never seen them, or maybe he’d tied them into position in preparation for this exact moment. I never knew with my master, and it hardly mattered. All I could

tell was that I'd been against the door for so long, the ropes were holding me up more than they confined me.

As though he sensed my weariness, he reached above my head and a moment later, I felt a tug on the ropes.

"There." His voice was that soft, soothing tone that could so easily lull me. "On to your knees."

"Master?" I gasped, meeting his eyes.

"You're exhausted," he explained. "The ropes stay, but you'll manage the last part on your knees."

Nodding, I climbed down to the carpet, steadied by his hand.

"Knees apart," he warned me. "You know what's coming."

Yes. If he didn't stop soon with the crop it was going to be me, whether or not he approved.

I groaned as the tongue neared my needy sex again, thrusting my hips forward to meet it.

"Now, now, now, greedy girl." Kade chuckled. "You'll only get what your Master thinks you deserve."

Oh God.

My head lolled back against the door as he trailed the head of the crop along my inner thigh. I was so horny, so incredibly frantic to come apart and welcome him in. Kade must be desperate to orgasm as well, but somehow, he seemed fixated with tormenting me.

"Master," I mewled, struggling for composure. "I can't hold on much longer."

"You'll hold on." His dark laughter swirled around me. "Because you know what happens if you don't."

I tensed at his warning, well aware of the sorts of repercussions that might await if I failed to make the grade.

“Who does this pussy belong to?” His crop shifted, returning to my sex and tap-tap-tapping, first my labia, then directly on my clit.

“You, Master.” I choked out the required response, knowing it was absolutely true. I’d once reveled in the proclamation that I was an independent woman, but I’d never been happy—never known pleasure like this.

“And these tits?” The tongue of his crop rose to my left breast, drumming lightly at the tissue before shifting to my right breast. “Who owns these?”

“You,” I croaked, rocking my hips forward and back in a wordless and desperate attempt to plead for more stimulation. Naturally, I accepted that I would beg if he instructed me to, but in a fraught attempt to make my case without the additional ignominy, I silently willed the crop back to my pussy.

“Correct.” Kade sounded triumphant as he ceded to my wish and slid the black tongue along my midriff and back to my excited clit. “They’re all mine, little girl, because you are all mine.”

“Yes, Master.”

I didn’t know what else to say. I only wanted more of the exquisite rhythm his toy provided and to hang on long enough to satisfy his twisted deadline before he finally relented and let me come apart.

“However,” he went on, continuing his gratifying pace at my pussy. “Your Master has needs that should be attended to before your own.”

I couldn’t hold back the groan that escaped as the crop drew away, though surely, I had known this was coming. With a few notable exceptions that were usually punishing in their own right, Kade always came before me, and we both knew I loved nothing more than having his shaft shoved down my throat when there was no choice but to take all of him.

“What was that, little girl?” His tone had hardened.

“Nothing, Master,” I replied, anxious not to upset him at this most critical juncture. “I would love to attend to your needs.”

“Hmmm...” His disapproving tone echoed around me as I waited on my knees. Slowly, he moved forward, stroking away the stray strands of hair that had fallen into my face before guiding my attention to his gaze. “You’ll be a good whore and satisfy me. Once you do, I shall see to your pleasure.”

The muscles at the apex of my thighs clenched together at his enticing vow.

“Thank you, Master.”

Nodding, he released my chin, his hand falling to his zipper to release his erection. His cock sprung forth eagerly, already leaking precum as he angled it in my direction.

“Open.”

Complying like the good little whore he’d helped to hone, my lips parted to take him in. Kade wasted no time, sliding deep into my throat and choking me, forcing me to breathe in more of his masculine scent while I yanked at my binds.

There was no getting away, and I knew it. No escaping the plight I so yearned for, and as the tip of his cock repeatedly hit the back of my throat, I accepted there was nowhere I’d rather be than there on the floor, giving him everything I had.

“Fuck,” he growled, clearly close to the edge already. “I’ve waited all day for this.”

One of his hands slid to my hair, fisting my tresses and forcing my head back as he slammed into my mouth. Bound and helpless, I was powerless to prevent his most welcome intrusion. Lost in the frenzy of his passion, I was surprised how fast his climax came, the hot shoots of his cum spurting over my face when he withdrew.

“That’s better.” He sighed, easing my hair away as he presented his shaft. “Make sure I’m clean, little girl.”

My tongue answered his call, lapping at whatever remnants of his seed remained at his base and balls until he was satisfied. Happy with my performance, he slid his cock away before falling to his haunches before me.

“You look fabulous.” His smirk had returned, though his expression was softer since he’d found hedonism.

“Thank you,” I sniffed, lifting my head to look at him. “But my arms are starting to ache, Master.”

“We can’t have that, can we?”

My hips rolled forward at his patronizing tone, demonstrating what we’d both already learned. I loved and loathed his callous treatment.

“It’s been a long day, Master.”

“Don’t worry, Tiffany.” Reaching for me, he grazed his fingers over my left cheek. “I won’t keep you waiting much longer. We both need supper, and while it would be fun to make you endure the meal still burning for my touch, I have decided to be kind.”

The ball of excited tension inside me knotted, unsure if I believed his assertion.

“You’re going to come hard, then we’ll eat together.”

“Thank you, Master.” Both ideas sounded fantastic to my fraught and weary body.

“You are such a good girl.” Leaning forward, his head dipped to my neck, planting kisses there as his snarled praise continued. “I’m crazy about you.”

“Master.” Eyes closed, I offered him my neck. I was already so frantic for his attention that his caress had never felt better. “Please.”

“Don’t start that again,” he warned with a chuckle. “You know how hard I get when you beg.”

The dark twinkle in his gaze, which I had come to know so well, sparkled as he rose to his full height. Towering over

me again, he collected the crop from the place he'd dropped it and walked to my side.

"I don't think it's going to take much to topple you over the edge. Do you agree, little girl?"

"Yes, Master." I was so fucking needy, only a touch or two would probably suffice.

"Good, then these should help." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a set of nipple clamps, joined together by a small silver chain.

"Oh, no," I whimpered, pressing myself into the door as he waved them in front of me. Having played with the evil clamps many times before, I knew how much the damn things hurt. Sure, they added impetus to my degradation, which always ratcheted up a powerful orgasm, but I detested them, nonetheless.

"Oh, yes," he replied, voice full of elation as he bent down to attach the first clamp. "Stay still and make this easier on yourself."

My breath was ragged as he tugged at my left nipple, lengthening the bud in preparation for the metal. I held my breath as its insidious jaws neared, gritting my teeth as they bit down on my sensitive tissue.

"God!" I winced, resisting the urge to scream every cuss word flitting through my brain.

"Almost there." Kade was already focused on my right nipple, tweaking it before the clamp descended.

I squealed as it took its place, though instantly aware of how the pain intensified my incessant craving for pleasure.

"Very nice," he purred, stroking my cheek as he gently pulled at the chain connecting the clamps. "You'll endure them for me, and in return, I will crop your sweet little clit to orgasm."

"Yes, Master," I gasped, watching as the chain rose toward my mouth.

“Open,” he commanded, placing the silver links between my teeth. “Hold this for me while I work.”

Chapter Eleven

Kade

Tiffany was a fucking vision. Thighs trembling, she gripped the clamp's chain in her mouth as she submitted to my crop, her eyes squeezed closed as she tried to process the competing sensations. The strokes were coming hard and fast now, just as she would be as soon as she let go and allowed the feelings to overcome her.

"My. Dirty. Little. Whore," I goaded, punctuating each word with a fresh slap to her sex.

Her hips jerked in response, her body acknowledging the sting at the same time her body processed something hotter. That was the real beauty of my woman. Not only was her body heaven, but her mind was permanently in the gutter. The more I denigrated her, the closer she came to splintering. Smiling, I inched closer, angling the tongue and raining the smacks down on her helpless clit. Her guttural moan conveyed how much she relished the impacts, even though with the chain between her lips, her mouth was unable to confirm my suspicions.

"This is what you get," I told her, delivering eight swats in rapid succession. "Punished, then pleased."

"Ooo od," she mewled, panting around the metal.

"Stop fighting," I warned her. "You have precisely three minutes to let go and come, or else you go to bed unsatisfied."

Enough of her protraction. Tiffany often needed steering into climaxes, and I was more than willing to oblige.

"Ooo!" she complained, her eyes flying open to meet my gaze.

"You heard me," I confirmed, motioning to the large clock on the wall. "Two and a half minutes."

“Uck.”

Her head lolled back, inadvertently tightening the chain between her teeth and her tantalizing tits. Keeping the strikes coming, I watched as on demand, she surrendered. Dangling in my ropes, her body spasmed as the wave of carnality crashed over her. Falling forward as much as the bondage permitted, she cried out, dropping the chain and gasping as its weight caused more hurt at her clamped nipples.

“That’s right,” I consoled, trying to ignore the way my cock sprang to life at the decadent display. “Come for me.” I kept the crop moving, tapping her clit and forcing more pleasure from her dancing hips.

“Master.” Warily, her head rose, flushed cheeks accentuating her beautiful blue eyes. “Oh God.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied, lowering to my knees and pressing the crop between her legs.

Jerking at the increased stimulation, she fought to contain her shaky breaths as I inched between her splayed knees.

“Look at me,” I ordered, guiding her chin up toward my face. “You’re mine, little girl.”

“Yes, Master.” She wore that wonderful glassy expression that her capitulation often evoked. “I’m yours.”

Dropping the crop, my arm snaked around her hips, easing her from her haunches and back to her knees. Face to face, I grazed my mouth over hers.

“Tell me again,” I insisted.

“I’m yours,” she murmured. “Always.”

“Damn right.” Pressing my lips to hers, I took the kiss I craved, my balls contracting when she parted and let my tongue devour her. Holding her against the doorway, I took my fill, enveloping her in my caresses until I was satiated. “Let’s take these off, shall we?”

Not waiting for her response, my hand left her chin and lowered to the nearest clamp. Grabbing the tiny jaws, I released their hold on her nipple, reveling in the hurt that echoed in her eyes.

“How’s that, beautiful?” I cooed, knowing full well how much it had injured her.

“Painful, Master,” she admitted as I nibbled at her lower lip.

“How painful?” I asked, holding her gaze as my fingers hovered over the other clamp.

“A lot,” she confessed.

“Good.” Leaning closer, I stared into her eyes as I went on. “Because that’s exactly what you deserve.”

A magnificent cry escaped her throat as I removed the second clamp, my hand discarding the offending article before lowering to rub the hurt away.

“Now, thank me,” I instructed as my mouth lowered to her shoulder and kissed away the sting. “For the punishment, the orgasm—for all of it.”

“Master.” Heaving a breath, she shivered as I locked gazes with her once more and in that moment, I swore I could see straight into her soul—to the very essence of the woman I’d kidnapped and who had in turn, captured me. “Thank you for everything.”

We knelt in silence, her head against my chest until her breathing returned to normal. This was the moment when she was often vulnerable and looked to me for solace. I was thrilled to provide it. After so long alone, I finally had someone I wanted to keep by my side.

Enclosing her in my embrace, I breathed in her intoxicating scent, allowing my mind to wander. Would my life have been different if I’d met Tiffany sooner? Would her presence have been enough to save all those women who’d

met their end in Hyde Park and beyond? I had no way of ever knowing but was consoled that there would never need to be another murder. She gave me everything I needed, more than I realized I yearned for and certainly more than I deserved.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, conscious that it was my responsibility to feed and nurture as well as chastise and confine.

“Yes, Master.” She twisted to acknowledge me, her lips curling. “Very.”

“Then I should apologize,” I started, my attention turning to the rope holding her right wrist. “We should have eaten before your punishment.”

“I understand.” She sighed as I released her wrist, her arm falling to her side as if it was made of lead.

“No,” I corrected her, directing my focus to her other arm. Unwinding the rope, I guided her limb to her side. “It’s not good enough. I pledge to do better should I need to punish my little girl again.”

“I cannot promise to always be on time.” She eyed me with her familiar salacious gaze. My little girl had resurfaced after her subspace. “You might have to spank me a lot, Master.”

“Is that right?” I tilted my head at her teasing tone. Could she really be in need of more of my attention already?

“Yes, Master.”

“I’m sure I can cope with the demand, little girl.” Rising to my feet, I offered her a hand and pulled her upright. “Careful,” I cautioned. “You might feel lightheaded for a while.”

“I’m okay, Master,” she replied, but even as she spoke, her body swayed, and she stumbled into me.

“No,” I instructed. “You’re not.” Shaking my head, I swept her into my arms. “I’ll carry you from here.”

Snuggling into my shoulder, she offered no protest as I stalked from my study into the hall. Passing one of the two cozy lounges located on this floor, I stepped inside and directed her to grab one of the fluffy blankets reserved for my pet. She smiled as she pressed it against her.

“Something smells good, Master.”

She sighed dozily as I carried her into the bright, modern kitchen. It was a far cry from the place I had grown up in, every refurbishment casting out more of the shadows my father had sowed.

“I hope so,” I replied. “I whipped up something special for us this afternoon and have left it on a low heat while I dealt with you.”

“You cooked something?” Her voice echoed with disbelief.

“Yes,” I confirmed, holding back my laughter. I had cooked for Tiffany on many occasions since she’d come to live with me, and I had no idea why she found it so unfathomable. “Your favorite, I believe?”

“Lasagna?” Her eyes lit up at the prospect. “No wonder it smells so good.”

“That’s right.” Kissing her forehead, I lowered her to the floor. “And because I’m a kind Master, I’m giving you the choice, little girl. Do you want to eat at the table together or, you can settle in your pet bed, and I’ll feed you?”

“Master.” A delightful blush bloomed on her cheeks. “I do appreciate the offer, but I’d much rather be at your feet.”

“Of course, you would.” I winked at her approvingly, gesturing to the soft dog bed we’d purchased for situations like this. “Then take your blanket and get comfortable. I’ll serve our food.”

Chapter Twelve

Lucas

Walking in the dark for about ten minutes, I hadn't even found the perimeter wall of the property. Fortunately, when I stumbled into it, I discovered it was designed more for aesthetics than safety, and with the help of my phone's torch function, I managed to climb over before heading for the lights of the house. I had no way of knowing what security measures Walker had in place but hoped an estate this remote was used to splendid seclusion and wouldn't benefit from the types of recording devices he'd employed in Noble's house. There were no obvious cameras as I darted across the wet grass, though it was true I didn't know that for certain. He could have devices hidden in the trees. I just had to hope he didn't know I was coming. That for once, he would be the one watched, rather than the patient observer.

The house was a couple of hundred feet from view as I steered to the right. Most of the lights were coming from the other side of the property, so it seemed sensible to approach where there was least chance of bumping into the owner. The air was cold, visible with each breath as if it sought to remind me of the impending danger. I'd been in similar situations before but had always enjoyed the protection of the police service. This time I was on my own, gone rogue without the prospect of rescue if my plans imploded. The realization accelerated my already anxious heartbeat.

Running my fingers over the brickwork, I followed the outside of the building, listening for any signs of life. I reached what I assumed was the rear before halting. Light shone from a room no more than a couple of meters from where I stood, and back to the wall, I edged in its direction. Pulse racing, I paused beside the enormous glass-fronted exterior, peering over my shoulder to see if anyone was there.

It took a couple of moments for my eyes to register the scene unfolding, my breath hitching as I acknowledged what I was seeing. The space appeared to be a gigantic kitchen diner, an elaborate cooking area punctuated by a lengthy marble island in the middle. Turning to face the wall, I pressed myself into the brick as I stared in disbelief. Walker was sitting at the island, perched on a high stool, and there by his feet and kneeling in what looked to be a dog's bed, was a naked woman.

Brow furrowing, I strained to recall what Noble looked like. The long dark hair of the woman in the kitchen certainly resembled the person I'd interviewed.

"What the fuck?" I whispered into the cool air.

A part of me wanted to turn and run, to flee back to the sanctuary of my car and never return. Whatever the hell was happening inside this house was none of my business. No crimes had been reported, and technically, there was nothing to investigate. It was only my gut instinct that had brought me there. I had nothing else to go on, no real evidence.

Despite the logic of that line of reasoning, I couldn't adhere to it. Just like I couldn't obey the commands of my superior officer when he'd told me to drop the obsession with Walker. I knew better, knew there was something wrong with him, and every fiber of me sensed he was more than just an ex-stalker with darker sexual proclivities.

"You're up to something," I mouthed, scrutinizing the inside of the house again.

Cutting up what looked like a plate of lasagna, he appeared to be taking a mouthful for himself before offering one to the woman on her knees. Jesus, what was happening in there? Was she not allowed to eat of her own accord? What kind of deranged individual elicited pleasure from humiliating another person that way?

"You're guilty." The sense of knowing grew inside as I muttered the words out loud. "I know you are. I just have to

figure out what it is you're guilty of and how to prove it.”

Leaning against the wall, I tried to think. I needed to get inside without either of them noticing me so I could take a better look around. Perhaps if I wandered to the other side of the building, I'd find a viable route while they were distracted in the kitchen. It was worth a shot. Peering back through the glass to make sure they were both occupied, I gasped at what I saw. The meal apparently over, the woman on her knees, who I presumed was Noble, had been led between Walker's legs. Fisting the length of her hair, he appeared to be directing her mouth up and down the length of his erect penis while she held her hands in the small of her back.

I stood, hypnotized for a few protracted seconds, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car. Part disgusted and part enthralled, I couldn't seem to look away as he guided her repeatedly along his shaft. The ecstasy on his face conveyed how much he was enjoying the experience, but why on Earth would she be willing to take part? Breath accelerating, I fell back against the wall, though the image of the two of them so intimately entwined remained seared into my mind.

Why would Noble want to pleasure him that way after a meal? For that matter, why would she stay in a dog bed permitting him to feed her? She was clearly messed up, which explained why she'd followed the man who'd abducted her across the country and ultimately dropped the charges against him. I'd seen the videos Walker had taken in her home. I knew the things he'd done, how long he'd planned and the way he'd treated her, yet I'd also seen some of her reactions, and her internet browsing history had revealed she frequently visited sites that offered similar content. There was only one logical explanation for her acquiescence. She'd gone along with his perverse plans because she enjoyed them. It was as simple as that.

“Oh God.”

Shivering at the thought, I wrapped my arms around myself, wishing I'd bought my winter coat. I hadn't

envisioned a nighttime component to my plan and wasn't prepared. Warily, I crept back to the edge of the wall and snuck one final glimpse of the show in progress. Noble's head moved faster and faster along Walker's penis, the speed suggesting he was close to a climax, and I might be about to lose my opportunity to exploit their distraction. Turning away, I headed along the wall the same way I'd arrived, doubling back past the front of the house to its opposite corner. I was as far away from the sex show in the kitchen as I could be, my best shot at entering the house.

Feeling my way along the wall, I used my torch for illumination. Despite the size of the house and swanky kitchen, the windows looked old and in some places rotting. Apparently, Walker hadn't seen the investment in double glazing as especially worthwhile. That suited me though. I knew from experience that aging windows were far easier to prize open than the modern varieties.

Directing the light, I noticed another, smaller pane—a downstairs bathroom, perhaps? Heart pounding with the possibility, I moved closer, gasping as I acknowledged the next miracle. The lesser-sized window was half-open, as though it had been left to air the room inside. Scanning the size of the space, I realized I could just about squeeze through if I utilized those old gymnastic skills I'd acquired as a child.

Wrenching the pane open as far as it would go, I examined the ground around me. A helpful fallen tree was strewn nearby, one portion of its trunk offering me the leg up I needed. Acting as fast as I could, I ran and dragged the log toward the wall. Resting by the open window, I caught my breath. This little escapade was teaching me just how out of shape I'd become.

“Too long in an office job,” I muttered, shaking my head in disapproval as I stepped up on the fallen trunk.

Flashing my torch inside the room, the beam of light exposed what I'd expected—a miniature bathroom with a toilet, basin and what looked like a shower cubicle.

Fortunately, there was nothing obstructing my journey to the floor, which comprised tiles that looked cold and uncompromising, but I had no other options. I was lucky to have an entry point, let alone one as sizable as the window. I was going to have to squeeze through and land, doing my best not to be heard or break anything in the process.

Sliding my phone away, I pulled myself up to the window ledge, balancing precariously as I gripped the crumbling frame and tried to settle my fraying nerves. It took every ounce of what little upper body strength I still had to hoist first one, then my second leg up to the window, maneuvering myself around so that I could drop to the floor on my feet. I winced at the loud echo my landing created, certain Walker would burst through the door and confront me, but fortunately he was busy in another part of the house, and his desire had brought me this unique chance for reconnaissance. I'd slip into the house and see what I could find. A character as nefarious as Walker was bound to have left evidence somewhere. Warrant or not, it was my job to discover it.

Chapter Thirteen

Tiffany

Wrapped in the red blanket he'd bought for me, I rested contentedly against his chest and listened to the soothing rhythm of his heart. There had once been a time when Kade filled me with terror, but these days, he was more tender—more like chrysanthemums, as he'd once put it. I'd never been happier.

“Thank you for dessert, little girl.” His hand, wrapped around my middle, rose over the blanket and cradled my breast.

“You're welcome, Master.” I smiled at the memory, running my tongue over my lip. I never tired of pleasuring him with my mouth and knowing he was happy made it all the sweeter. “Thank you for the meal.”

It had been scintillating to be fed from my dog bed. Kade had helped ease the fantasy from the depths of my desire to the fore of our play together, and I didn't know how to show my gratitude. Shame and guilt had weighted me down for so long where my passions were concerned, but after everything we'd been through, there was nothing he didn't know about me, nothing I couldn't share with him.

“I'll always look after you.”

Squeezing my breast, he chuckled as I squirmed on his lap. He was stretched out on the huge leather couch in the cozy den, but ever since he'd pulled me onto his lap, my punished ass grazed over his pants. Despite my solace in his arms, there were few comfortable positions on his thighs.

“Problem, little girl?” His condescending tone suggested he already knew the answer.

“No, Master.” I smiled in spite of the hurt. “I'm fine.”

“Good.” Straightening, he tugged me closer. “And yes, you are fine.”

“Can you tell me more about the woman who followed you?” Twisting to meet his eyes, I whimpered as his lips brushed over mine.

“There’s not much else to tell, Tiffany,” he concluded after the caress. “I don’t want you to worry about it.”

“I’m not. It just seems odd.”

“I agree. I don’t think I’ve made any new enemies.”

“An old one then?” My brows knitted as he settled in his seat and urged me back to join him.

“I told you not to worry.”

His voice had taken that steely edge, a caution for me to drop the agenda, but it wasn’t as simple as that. Kade wasn’t the sort of man who’d invent being followed. If he thought the woman had tailed him, then I believed him and I wanted to know why.

“I’m only curious,” I countered, conscious of his expression. Disregarding the ache in my ass, I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Do you think it’s someone who knows about your past, Master?”

“My past?” He sounded skeptical.

“Yes, Master.” My pulse quickened as his eyebrow arched. “You know—Hyde Park and what happened there.”

“No one else knows.” He spoke with absolute conviction. “You are the only living soul who does, and I know you haven’t hired a private detective, little girl. I’ve been watching you closely.”

Chuckling at his quip, my gaze lowered to his chest. “Yes, I suppose you’re right, but—”

“Honestly,” he interrupted. “It’s nothing.” His palms rose to my face, cradling me. “And if it turns out to be something, I’ll deal with it.”

“I know.” I had no doubt. Kade was good at covering his tracks. Rather too good...

“Good.” Leaning closer, he planted a kiss on my nose. “Now rest, little girl. You’ve had a long day.” Tugging me back with him, he pulled me closer, and I landed in his arms. Stretching my hand over his toned abs, I released the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Kade was right. He would deal with things. I didn’t need to worry.

Kade

Waiting until she dozed off, I listened to the sound of her contented breathing before I rose, leaving her tucked up in her blanket on the couch. I accepted now that my little girl was working again, she’d be more tired than before and for the first time in my life, I was happy to support someone else’s decision. That meant chauffeuring her around and cooking her meals—responsibilities I was happy to take on. It also meant spanking her delicious little ass when she stepped over the line. Whichever way I looked at the life we’d created together, I was one hell of a lucky man.

Grinning at the prospect, I crossed the hall to my office. The place needed to be tidied after our impromptu session and as I stepped inside, the scent of sex taunted my nostrils.

“Fuck.”

Shaking my head, I collected the papers that had fallen from my desk and rearranged them. If this evening was a good example of what nights would be like, I was going to be one very satisfied master. I could still imagine her there, bent over my desk as she took the paddling. Reaching for the implement, the recollection swelled my only recently satiated dick.

“Not know,” I ordered, though the organ willfully disobeyed, hardening as I turned to survey the ropes still hanging from my door. “Maybe I’ll leave those,” I mused, collecting the crop where it had been abandoned. “They could prove to be useful.”

Smirking at the idea, I placed the items on the edge of my mahogany bookcase before slumping into my chair. My gaze shifted to the multiple screens I had perched around my desk, surveying the various scenes around the property. Since Tiffany had come to be back in my care, I’d disabled all external surveillance beyond Barrington and redirected the feeds to my own closed-circuit cameras. As I sat there, approximately ten separate devices recorded scenes around Barrington, from the trees at the perimeter of the property, to the entire exterior of the house. Naturally, I didn’t expect the cameras to detect any abnormalities, the recordings were more of a safety blanket for a man as paranoid as me, but I checked them every day regardless, conscious that one day they might prove to be useful.

Scanning through the last few hours of footage, I leaned back in my chair, allowing my thoughts to return to Tiffany. My gaze was on the screen, but my head was well and truly lost in the fireworks of our passion. Her lips had been so divine wrapped around my cock when she’d been bound to my door, and her cute little pet act in the kitchen had guaranteed that another dose was required before we adjourned to the lounge. I’d been so—

My happy memories were splintered as something peculiar caught my eyes on the screen. Heart racing, I leaned forward, instructing the recording to rewind and play the footage again. The air around me chilled as I watched more closely this time, my heart stopping altogether when I spotted the cause of my concern.

Someone was on my property!

Perched on a high branch of one of the trees, the camera angle wasn’t great, but it was good enough to confirm my

worst suspicions. There, walking from one side of the screen to the other was a stranger. Hands clenched into fists, I slammed my knuckles against the desk, barely acknowledging the pain. It was difficult to tell whether the uninvited guest was male or female, but based on their height, I had a hunch it might be a woman.

The woman in the blue car.

“You don’t know that for sure,” I muttered, switching to another camera to see if I could follow her progress, but deep down, I sensed it was. Surely, it was too much of a coincidence that the same day I’m followed, an intruder appears on my property.

“There!”

Spotting her on the camera at the rear of the house, I watched the footage from only an hour ago, horrified to see her surveying the kitchen. Based on the time stamp, there was no question about what had transfixed her. We’d been dining, hence why the whole room had been lit up. It seemed as though our guest had stuck around to watch our meal before gawping at my dessert, then heading back around the perimeter.

“Bitch,” I hissed as I skimmed different cameras, frantically searching for her whereabouts. It wasn’t until I found the camera pointed at the other side of the house that panic flared. Gripping the edge of my desk, I watched as the unknown female climbed into what looked like my downstairs bathroom window.

“She’s in the house!” The air seemed to be sucked from the room as the admission resounded around me.

She’s somewhere in the house.

Heart hammering in my chest, I dashed to my bookcases, yanking out the leather-bound copies of old expensive hardbacks and entering the security code to my safe. There inside were my mother’s jewels, the few remaining possessions of hers that I owned, a wad of cash that I kept for

emergencies, and right at the back of the box—my gun. I grabbed the weapon, checking it was loaded and that the safety was off.

Someone was in my house. I didn't know if it was the bitch who'd followed me earlier, or someone else, but whoever it was, they were about to discover what happened when you messed with Kade Walker.

Chapter Fourteen

Lucas

Endless dark corridors. That was all I knew as I roamed the depths of Walker's lair. I hadn't given much thought to what the inside of his castle would look like, but if I had then surely, it would have been like this—each shadowy passageway as threatening as the man himself.

Conscious that he and Noble were still occupied on the other side of the property in flagrante delicto, I stayed close to the bathroom I'd climbed into, investigating various closets and a room that seemed to be a home-equipped gymnasium.

Typical, I mused as I crept along the hall in the half-light. I didn't dare use my flashlight and attract unwelcome attention. *Only a prick as wealthy as Walker could afford to have a private gym at home.* There was no chance I'd be able to afford such luxury on my D.S. salary. It was standard these days—the bad guys seemed to get all the breaks while those of us on the right side of the law were left to struggle. I'd just about had enough of—

My thoughts were fractured by the sound of footsteps up ahead and a distant light turning on from an onward corridor.

Shit!

Dread surged in my chest, urging my feet to move to the only available hiding place—a small nearby closet. Opening the door, I squeezed myself inside next to the various outfits hanging there, praying that whoever it was wouldn't find me. Ear pressed to the door, I listened as the tread grew louder, passing by the cupboard and moving into another room. Waiting until I couldn't hear any movement, I inched the door open to find the hall cast back in familiar darkness.

Thank fuck...

The shadows that had once been my foe now seemed friendly as I untangled myself from the contents of the closet and pressed myself into the wall. Someone had just come by and wherever they'd gone, they were still close by. Based on the heavy noise of the footsteps, my guess was that it was Walker, and the outline of illumination from the door at the end of the passage told me where he'd gone.

Go! I willed myself, glancing back toward the bathroom that offered the exit. *Just go and come back another time.* This was dangerous, and if I got caught, God only knew what he'd do.

However, I didn't take my own advice. Steeling myself, I tiptoed toward the doorway instead of the direction of relative safety. If Walker was ensconced inside, then Noble was somewhere else—alone. I hadn't seen any evidence that anyone else was around—there were no other noises in the house and no other cars on the gigantic driveway. Perhaps if I could speak to her without his nefarious influence, I could make her see sense? At the very least, I could take a better look around and decide if something was suspicious.

Walker had a proven track record in the art of duplicity and abduction, and I didn't trust him any farther than I could throw him. Irrespective of what Everly had said, it was possible Walker had persuaded her to come there under duress, that the acts I'd seen playing out in the kitchen were far from consensual.

I shuddered at the idea, striding quietly away in the direction I'd heard Walker come from. Noble was in peril—whether she realized it or not. Even if she'd cooperated in her residency at Barrington House, it was likely that she didn't recognize how deranged and dangerous Walker was. Breath accelerating, I decided there and then—I had to help her, had to save her. Even if I wasn't on duty, I had an obligation to protect and serve.

It didn't take long for me to discover where she was stashed away. All I had to do was follow the light, and the only

other room in the mansion with any illumination drew me straight to her sleeping form. Sprawled out under a red, fluffy blanket on a leather sofa, Noble was out for the count as I walked into the room. She didn't even stir when I scanned the room and took a few pictures as future evidence. In fact, it wasn't until I was only a foot from her that her eyelids finally flickered open.

“Tiffany?”

It was strange to use her first name after so long referencing her as Noble. Ironic really, because if she'd chosen to comply with Walker's wishes, there was little that was noble about her at all.

“Wh-What?” Leaping to an upright position, she grabbed the cover and pulled it tighter around her. “D.S. Lucas?” Her brows knitted. “What are you doing here?”

“I've been worried about you.” At least she recognized me. “I spoke to your old boss, and he told me that you'd moved here.”

“Rex?” The puzzlement in her eyes deepened.

“Mr. Everly, yes,” I clarified.

“But how did you get in?” She glanced around frantically, no doubt looking for her dark protector. “Kade would never have let you...” Her voice trailed away, and then, as if she'd remembered something new, she leaned forward on her seat. “Was it you?”

“Was what me?”

“Who followed him earlier today?” She rose to her feet, clutching the blanket around her.

I didn't want to burst her bubble of modesty, but between the show she'd put on in the kitchen and the hours of footage I'd been forced to endure at the police station, I'd seen most of the woman already.

“That was you, wasn't it?”

“I’ve come to help you.” Ignoring her question, I stepped closer and offered her my hand. “To get you out of here.”

“Why would I want to leave?” She shook her head as if I was a fool. “I’m with the man I love. I’m not going anywhere.”

“The man you love?” I snorted, balking at her deferential tone. “After everything that swine did to you, how can you say you love him?”

“You don’t know him like I do.” Noble was instantly defensive. “No one does.”

“I bet you don’t know everything about him.” Hedging my bets, I stared her down, hoping my bluff worked. It was true I didn’t know Walker’s history, but if she claimed to know him better than anyone else, it was possible she did. Perhaps, in her unhinged pursuit of his defense, she would slip up and reveal something that might prove useful. “I bet you don’t know what he’s done.”

“You’d be surprised.” Her brow rose defiantly, confirming my suspicion that she indeed harbored information that could be purposed for Walker’s prosecution.

“So, you *do* know about him?” My tone was accusing, extending my bluff. “You know what he did, and still you stay?”

“Fuck you!” she spat, jabbing one finger at me. “Who are you to come in here and judge me?” Hesitating, she looked me up and down before continuing. “In fact, how are you here? I never pressed charges, so there can’t be an active police investigation.”

“That’s right, little girl.”

My blood ran cold as Walker’s voice echoed from the doorway. Time morphed into slow motion as I spun around to discover him blocking my only exit from the small room.

“There is no active police investigation.” He stared at me, his gray eyes cold and devoid of emotion. “Do you know this

woman?”

“She was one of the police officers who handled my case when...” Her voice trailed away as though she was somehow guilty about halting the atrocious ways Walker had treated her at Pennsylvania Avenue.

“So, you’re a cop?” If it was possible, his expression hardened.

“That’s right,” I replied, straightening in defiance. “I’m with the police, and—”

“No.” Folding his arms across his chest, he glared at me.

“No, what?” I fired back, desperately trying not to fluster.

“You might be a cop, but I don’t think you’re *with* the police at all.”

“Master?” Noble’s gaze darted from me to him. “What do you mean?”

“Master?” I scoffed. “After what he did to you, how can you call him that *by choice*?”

“I have another question.” Closing the door behind him, Walker strode into the room, though my exit was still largely blocked by his hulking presence. “Why the fuck are you in my house?”

Chapter Fifteen

Kade

Anger furred through my chest as I saw the stranger standing there interrogating my little girl.

“Fuck you!” Tiffany hissed, pointing her finger at the intruder. “Who are you to come in here and judge me?” She paused, looking the woman up and down, and for some reason, I had the impression that they knew one another, though I wasn’t sure why. “In fact, *how* are you here? I never pressed charges, so there can’t be an active police investigation.”

“That’s right, little girl.” I wandered farther into the room, holding the door frame. “There is no active police investigation.”

They both turned to me as I spoke, Tiffany’s eyes warm and grateful, while only horror resonated in the outsider’s gaze.

“Do you know this woman?” I asked, turning my attention to Tiffany.

“She was one of the police officers who handled my case when...” Tiffany’s words dried up, but her sheepish expression conveyed the end of her sentence. The intruder was in the police service and had worked on the case against me.

“So, you’re a cop?” My focus drilled into the woman who’d dared to break into my house. I knew the police were corrupt, but since when did they break and enter? The very least this bitch needed was a warrant and a damn good explanation, and frankly, even that might not be enough to placate me.

“That’s right.” She blew out a breath as if the confession had somehow saved her. “I’m with the police, and—”

“No.” Glaring at her, my jaw tensed as I ended whatever pointless defense she was about to attempt.

“No, what?” she countered, no doubt trying to recall her training as she assessed the size of me in front of her only usable exit. She’d already squeezed herself through one window, but she wouldn’t be fleeing Barrington House in the same way. Based on the fury swimming in my system, she might not be fleeing at all.

“You might be a cop, but I don’t think you’re *with* the police at all.” It was the only answer that made sense. Why would the police still be hunting me? They had nothing on me whatsoever.

“Master?” Confusion glimmered in the little girl’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Master?” The cop balked. “After what he did to you, how can you call him that *by choice*?”

“I have another question.” I’d heard just about enough of this shit. “Why the fuck are you in my house?”

“You didn’t let her in, Master?” Tiffany asked.

“No.” Beckoning my lover forward with one hand, I snaked my arm around her as she raced to meet me. “Whoever she is, she broke into the house via a bathroom window. I just watched her acrobatic performance on the C.C.T.V.”

“What?” Tiffany’s tone dripped with disdain. “You broke the law to gain entry?”

“I had no choice,” the cop argued. “I had reason to believe that you were hurt.”

“If that was true, you’d have a warrant.” Tiffany’s tone hardened, reminding me of the woman I’d seen in action in court. It was an unexpectedly alluring aspect of my little girl. “And you’d have arrived with police support.”

“Yes, well...” the stranger glanced down at her feet.

“So, do you?” I prompted, kissing Tiffany’s forehead before I stepped toward the cop. “Do you have a warrant?”

“She doesn’t have one, Master.” Tiffany sighed behind me. “Whatever she’s doing here is off the record.”

“Which brings me back to my original question,” I growled. “Why are you here?”

“I told you!” she snapped, one of her hands reaching for her pocket. Acting on instinct, I grasped her wrist, stopping whatever she was about to do. “Get off me!” she cried, clawing at my hand with her free palm.

“Tiffany.” I motioned for my lover to join me while the cop tried in vain to wrestle my hand away. “Would you mind reaching into her pocket and finding out what she’s about to pull on me?”

“Certainly, Master.” Moving behind the cop, Tiffany obeyed, pulling out a phone and a yellow weapon from her pocket. “What’s this? A taser?”

“It seems so.” I winked at my gorgeous girl, gesturing for her to move away. The cop was still an unknown quantity, and clearly, she’d come armed. I didn’t want Tiffany too close to her. “Switch off the phone and give it to me, please.”

Holding the stranger in place, I waited as Tiffany obeyed. Passing me the device, I surveyed it briefly before tucking it into my back pocket next to my gun.

“You have no right!” she complained.

“Neither do you,” I reminded her. “Now, why would you need a weapon before you broke into my house, Officer?”

“It’s Detective Sergeant,” the cop grumbled as I manhandled both of her wrists behind her back.

“Oh, a detective?” My tone was wry. “Well, it’s an honor to be so violated by someone of your rank.”

“Fuck you,” she spat, still trying to grapple me away, but she was about to find out what countless others had already

discovered—there was no getting away from Kade Walker once he had you in his sights. “It’s Detective Sergeant Lucas and you have no right to treat me this way.”

“You have no right to be break into my house,” I repeated.

“I didn’t damage your property,” she hissed, as though that was somehow a justification for her behavior.

“Look, Detective.” Placing the taser on the floor by the door, Tiffany’s hands rose to her hips. “If you’ve spoken to Rex, you’ll know that I’m happy and safe. Why would you come here and break the law to prove it?”

“Instinct.” Lucas’s back straightened.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I wanted to roll my eyes at her bullshit. She had the audacity to violate my rights, then wanted to harp on about her gut feelings? Give me a break.

“I know there’s something off about all of this.” She gestured around the room as best she could without the use of her hands before fixing her stare on me. “Something off about you.”

“Is that right?” I drawled, amused by her ‘experienced cop’ routine. As it turned out, her instincts were spot on, but if Lucas thought creeping into my house and trying to lure my lover away was the answer, she had another think coming.

“Yes.” Her brown eyes narrowed. “Any man who pulls off the kind of stunt you enjoyed at Tiffany’s house is far from a novice. You’ve been involved in criminality before...” Hesitating, her gaze ran up and down my body. “Haven’t you?”

“Well, isn’t she cute?” I mocked, ignoring the writhing detective and focusing on my little girl.

“Master,” Tiffany warned. “Be careful. She’s a cop and could have a wire.”

“Tape recordings are rarely admissible in court, little girl.” I chuckled as I held my new captive steady. “You of all people should be aware of that.”

“Thank you for the tip, Master.” Laughing, she secured the blanket around her body like a sarong. “I’m just saying, be careful.”

“So, you do have something to hide?” Twisting in my grip, the cop’s gaze darted between Tiffany and me.

“Oh, I have plenty of things to hide,” I snarled, tightening my grasp on her wrists as I yanked her closer to my body. “And now you’ve climbed into my domain, Detective, you’re about to discover all sorts of secrets.”

Chapter Sixteen

Tiffany

“Master.” My pulse accelerated as I locked gazes with the man who’d become my world. “What are you doing?”

I’d seen that dark glint in Kade’s eyes before and it had rarely produced anything positive for those involved. Despite all that he’d put me through, I was well aware that I was the only one who’d lived to tell the tale. Everyone else who’d witnessed that sinister gleam had been dumped God only knew where.

“What I do, little girl.” His brow rose as Lucas struggled to break free of his grip. I had news for her. I knew from painful experience that however hard she tried, Kade’s grip was like a vice. “I’m taking control.”

“What does that mean?” Anxiety was rising in my belly like the early waves of an impending storm.

“Tiffany.” Lucas’ eyes widened in desperation. “Help me! You know I’ve only got your interests at heart.”

“Master.”

I couldn’t acknowledge her plea, couldn’t take on board the logic of what she was saying. I knew deep down that Lucas and the other police only wanted to do the right thing, to put the proverbial bad guys away. Christ, I’d built an entire career around the same premise, but the problem was I’d fallen in love with one of those bad guys, and now my loyalty was torn. Did I side with the righteous—the cause I’d spent my life defending and promoting? Or did I lean into the new enthralling part of me—the aspect that Kade had stirred and developed? A woman could go mad trying to figure it out.

“Master, please.” Running to his side, I touched his shoulder. “Think about whatever you’re going to do next.”

Silver eyes met mine, and the excitement shimmering there confirmed what I already feared—Kade had a plan in mind, and it didn't bode well for Lucas.

“Go to my drawer in the coffee table.” He signaled to the table as if I didn't know where it was. “Get my ropes, little girl.”

“Master.” Damn it, he wasn't listening to me! The room around me blurred, time stretching out until each passing second was reminiscent of a looming car crash. Every breath felt like we were accelerating into the collision that would kill us. “Don't do this.”

“Little girl.” His voice deepened to the tone I knew better than to push, but it didn't overrule my protests. “Do as you're told.”

“Yeah, Tiffany,” Lucas sneered, her voice sardonic as she pulled against Kade's hands. “Be a good girl and do as you're told, why don't you?”

“Fuck.”

The word slipped from me as I assessed my increasingly hopeless predicament. Whatever I did, whoever I complied with, it made no difference. There would be huge ramifications from whatever happened next, and I was powerless to prevent them.

“Tiffany!”

I jolted at his chastising tone, my heart racing as I sprang into action.

“Sorry,” I panted, dashing to the coffee table and opening Kade's drawer.

He liked to keep a selection of his favorite toys in there—things he could use to bind and torment me at will. Spotting the lengths of rope, I grabbed them, tension clawing at my insides as I presented them to my master.

“I'm going to hold our guest, and you're going to bind her.” Kade's gaze was unyielding as he explained my

instructions.

“No!” Lucas cried, the intensity of her fight increasing as he spelled out her fate. Slamming her feet into the ground, she attempted to wiggle free, unaware that her endeavors were futile.

“Master!” I implored him. “Don’t do this!”

Taking Lucas hostage wouldn’t help our situation. The last thing we needed was a police officer in captivity—we’d only just reached an equilibrium between us.

“We’ll talk about this *in private*.” Gritting his teeth, he gestured to the ropes in my hands. “Now move!”

“Okay.” Nausea rose in my stomach as I moved forward, dodging Lucas’ flailing body. “How do I do this, Master?” Meeting his gaze, I sensed the determination in them, and fool that I was, those gray orbs anchored me.

“It’s all right,” he soothed, maneuvering Lucas away from me and presenting her wrists as best he could. “I’ll guide you. Slip one length up and around her wrists.”

Heart pounding, I nodded as I moved into position. My hands trembled as I wound the rope around her pale skin, every fiber of my body telling me to refuse. I didn’t want to do this, didn’t want to be part of whatever this was—but I was no idiot. What other options did we have? We could hardly just let the good detective go, especially in light of the inferences Kade had bandied. Then there was the issue of her misdemeanors. Lucas had thought it appropriate to gain entry to Barrington without permission and snuck around in the dark while armed with a taser. That was bound to be badly received by anyone—let alone my master. She probably had no idea how deep she was stuck in the mire.

“And wind it around again,” he encouraged, lifting one hand to restrain Lucas at the shoulder as I worked. “Good.”

“Get off me!” The Detective was getting hysterical, a condition I could well empathize with. “Get your hands off me.”

“Keep going,” Kade went on, disregarding her entreaties. “And push the end back through the middle.”

I did as he ordered, functioning on some odd type of autopilot until he gave the word.

“Okay, move aside.” He moved with lightning speed, just as I released the rope, grabbing the strands and pulling them tight before securing them.

“You bastard!” Lucas yelled, anger resounding in her voice. “I told you to. Get. Off. Me!”

Lifting her heel, she brought it crashing back into Kade’s shin, knocking him off balance as he finalized the knots. He stumbled back, my heart somersaulting as I rushed to see if he was all right.

“Master?” I gasped. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he answered through gritted teeth as his gaze followed Lucas’ attempted escape.

Sadly for her, the rope had already done its job, and even though she dashed away, the door was closed, and she had no hands to rectify the situation. Turning, her eyes flitted around the room, looking for another way out.

“Bitch!” Kade hissed, rubbing his leg. “You’ll pay for that.”

“How could you do this?” Lucas’s attention focused on me, her eyes wide as Kade approached. “How could you help him?”

“It’s okay,” I reassured, moving between the two of them. “He’s not going to hurt you. We just want to talk.”

Two sets of eyes bored into me, both rejecting the vow.

“Try anything like that again, and you and me are going to have a problem.” He growled the words at Lucas, who met his gaze with obvious defiance.

“You don’t frighten me.” Rounding her shoulders, she stared him down. “You might have one woman under your

spell, but I can see you for what you are, Walker. You can't control me."

"Wrong," Kade smirked, his focus darting to me for an instant. "I already have the woman I want. You, Detective, are nothing but an inconvenience."

Chapter Seventeen

Lucas

Standing there, my heart palpitating and my hands bound, it was easy to see what a miscalculation I'd made. I'd thought I could slip in and out of Barrington House undisturbed, but my mistake should have been obvious. As soon as I'd decided to make contact with Noble, I'd changed the rules and got sloppy. Now, I had Walker and his damn ropes to take into consideration. I'd handed him all the leverage.

"You don't frighten me." Glaring at the architect of my current misfortune, I scowled, falling back on the one attribute I had in abundance—anger. I was furious with him for twisting the truth and controlling Noble, outraged with her for being so easily manipulated, and—if truth be told—fuming at myself for not having anticipated the outcome. "You might have one woman under your spell, but I can see you for what you are, Walker. You can't control me."

"Wrong," Kade smirked, an insidious expression that I was willing to wager other victims had seen before me. Noble wasn't the first and trussed up in his house I'd never been more certain of it. "I already have the woman I want." He signaled to Noble. "You, Detective, are nothing but an inconvenience."

"I'm a bit more than that," I spat back. "I'm a well-respected detective, and when I don't turn in for duty, I have colleagues who'll follow my well-prepared trail right back here to you, Walker." Little of that was true, of course, but he and his confused lover had no way of knowing. The last time either of them had seen me, I was on duty, and Noble still worked for the C.P.S. She knew how bad binding me and refusing to let me leave would look for Walker if this went to trial.

“She’s right, Master.” Noble stared at him with desperate eyes. “They’ll come right to Barrington House if we’re not careful.”

“I don’t believe her.” Brow rising, he swaggered toward me.

“Wh-What do you mean?” Noble spluttered, watching his advance. “I’m telling you, Master, she’s definitely a cop and —”

“I know she’s a cop,” he went on, effectively cutting her off. “But it’s like you said, little girl, if she was on duty, she’d have a warrant and police support. Lucas has none of those things though.” Edging closer, he eyes me with suspicion. “She’s bluffing.”

“Bluffing?” I balked, irate that he’d managed to read me so well. I was so used to dealing with the types of morons the uniformed officers brought into the station, I’d clearly forgotten that some criminals were smarter than the average offender. Unluckily for me, Walker appeared to be one of them.

“You don’t think I’ve covered my bases?” Shit, why hadn’t I covered my bases? Even the private network on my phone would make it difficult for Baron to follow me. “Don’t think I’ve left a trail that will lead them right here?”

“I can’t say for sure,” he admitted. Inching closer, a dark gleam shone in his eyes. “But my gut says no.”

The ball of nervous energy in my belly tightened at his arrogant tone.

“I can’t say why you’d have been stupid enough to come here alone, but I think you have.”

“You’re wrong,” I insisted, but even as I yelled, I sensed the color in my cheeks—the telltale sign that would convey my duplicity.

“I guess we’ll see.” His irritatingly smug expression never faltered. “If you’re right, this place should be swarming with

cops by tomorrow.”

“Master,” Noble gasped, reaching for his arm. “If they arrive, how do we explain keeping her captive?”

“It’s okay, Tiffany.” He glanced her way before shaking her free from his wrist. “If they arrive, I’ll simply explain that this woman broke into my house, and I’m considering pressing charges.”

“They’ll expect you to call 999,” I interrupted, conscious of the dread crawling up the length of my body. I should know better than this, should know not to panic and go anywhere alone, but I’d been so hellbent on bringing Walker down, I hadn’t paid attention to the details.

“I tried,” he replied in the most patronizing tone. “But the phone lines here are notoriously bad, and I couldn’t call out. Isn’t that right, little girl?”

His focus fell on Noble, whose face drained of color.

“Master.” Gaze lowering, she backed away. “Don’t do this.”

“I’m not *doing* anything.” Evidently, he didn’t enjoy being countered. “Except defending my property by containing the assailant who broke in.”

“Now, hang on!” No one had ever called me an assailant in my life, and I wasn’t about to start taking crap like that from someone like him! “I’ve done nothing wrong except do my job.”

“We’re going to have to find a gag for her.” Walker’s lips curled as he addressed the woman who had somehow fallen for his sickening charade. “And we both know where they’re housed.”

“Oh God.” Shaking her head, Noble looked close to tears.

“Stop worrying.” He chuckled as he moved in her direction. “I won’t do anything to hurt her.”

“It’s just that when you start saying things like that...”
Panting, she didn’t seem able to finish her sentence.

“Look.” Walker’s palms rose into the air in a vain attempt at innocence. “Why don’t you go and get her some water from the kitchen? We’ll all sit down and talk. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Detective?”

His attention flew back to me, both of their gazes drilling into my face.

“Okay,” I started, well aware that I had few other options. “Let’s talk.”

“Okay.” Tension visibly fell from Noble’s shoulders. “I’ll just run to the kitchen and grab water.”

“Thank you, little girl,” he encouraged, stroking her face as she walked past him. “We’ll be waiting for you.” He inhaled as she paced away, closing the door as the sound of her footsteps faded in the distance. “And then there were two.”

“What are you going to do?” I demanded, retreating as he walked past me. “She might trust you, but I don’t.”

“Then that makes two of us, Detective.” His cocky tone continued as he wandered to the same coffee table Noble had found the ropes in and opened the second drawer. “I never trust people in authority. I’ve been quite badly burned, I’m afraid.”

“Just let me go.” Moving back toward the door, my thoughts turned to making a run for it when Noble returned. It was true I wouldn’t get far without the use of my hands, and I certainly couldn’t climb back out of the bathroom window, but I couldn’t just stay there and become his next victim. I had to try.

“I won’t say anything to my bosses.” I glanced back to see him hunched over the open drawer. A large part of me couldn’t believe what I was saying. I sounded like one of the mindless victims I scooped off the streets, pleading with a monster for mercy, but I couldn’t help myself. Something about the man was inherently dangerous, although, apparently, I was the only

one who could see it. “We can just pretend none of this ever happened.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” His voice was louder. “Let’s do that.”

Wait... what?

Spinning at the sound of his tread, my pulse quickened. He was right on top of me, although I swore, I hadn’t heard him move.

“Wh-What are you doing?” I loathed the tremble in my voice, the open acknowledgment that I was petrified, and he was the cause.

“Agreeing with you.” He grinned, gesturing to the door behind me. “We should just pretend that none of this ever happened.

“O-kay.” I didn’t believe him. Propositions like this were always too good to be true, but if he’d only open the door, I could bolt. I might have a chance... “Great.”

“Allow me,” he went on, striding to my side and reaching for the door handle. “I can see you’re a little tied up at the moment. I’m sure Tiffany won’t mind removing those for you. She’s always been fond of my ropes.”

“Thanks...”

My heart raced so fast I didn’t know what else to say, but as his hand reached for the doorknob, all I could focus on was the hope it offered—a future beyond this house, this mistake... So focused was I on the handle as it turned that I didn’t notice his other hand moving, didn’t see that there was anything wrong until the sharp scratch at my neck—until it was too late.

“What was that?” Jerking, I tried to move away, but without my hands, I couldn’t beat him off.

“Settle down,” he answered in an annoyingly soothing tone. “It’ll all be over soon.”

“Shit.” I gasped as he pulled the needle away, my brain registering what had just happened. “What have you given me, you fucker?”

“Nothing bad.” Chuckling, I wandered back to the table and cast the needle aside. “Just something to calm you down.”

“No!” I cried, kicking out at the door as hard as I could. If I could only attract Noble’s attention—surely, she would be disgusted with what he’d done? “Help me!”

“Calm down.” His hands pulled me back, maneuvering me toward the couch and even though I wanted to resist, the walls around me were already fading to white. I knew I wouldn’t be standing for much longer. “You just need to rest.”

The last thing I remembered as my face hit the leather seat was the sound of the door opening and the chilling thud as a glass hit the ground and shattered into a thousand shards.

Chapter Eighteen

Tiffany

“What the hell happened?”

Heart hammering, my breath accelerated as the glass of water slipped from my fingers. From some distant place I was vaguely aware of it hitting the hard, wooden floor and shattering, although the noise wasn't enough to draw my focus from the couch. There, slumped on her front like a road traffic victim, was Detective Lucas, her arms still bound behind her.

“Master?” I demanded, watching the way he stood over her.

“Watch your tone, little girl.” Kade didn't move as he delivered the warning.

“What's that supposed to mean?” I asked, scanning the ground for anywhere safe I could step that wouldn't involve walking on broken glass. “What happened to her, Master? She was fine when I left. You said you wanted to talk.” Scanning the room, my gaze landed on the discarded syringe left on the coffee table. I didn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out the rest. “You drugged her.” Disdain echoed in my voice. “Why?”

“I told you to watch your tone.” Spinning to face me, his face was like thunder.

“That's hardly the issue here, is it, Master?” Fury furred in my chest, that old familiar foe that had taunted me in the past when Kade had made unilateral choices without my involvement. “Why did you drug her?”

“It's always the issue.” Closing the distance between us, he towered over me in a heartbeat, his shoes crushing the

shards of glass on the ground. “Your obedience and respect are pivotal.”

Gripping the blanket tighter around me, I blew out a breath.

“And the detective?” I couldn’t help my sardonic tone, but what did he bloody expect? One moment he asked me to get her a drink, and the next, he’d knocked her unconscious.

“You distracted me so you could drug her.”

“Yes.” As suspected, he was unapologetic. “I knew you wouldn’t concur with the plan, so I just—”

“You just went right ahead and did it, anyway.” It was the damndest thing, but despite his strength, his height and his proven track record of violence, there wasn’t a single flicker of fear in me as I interrupted him. I knew him better than anybody. I was the woman he loved, and despite his petulant show of authority, there was no doubt in my mind—he *did* love me. Kade couldn’t frighten me anymore. He’d taken me to the limit of my fear too many times. Now, all I saw standing before me was the small, petrified boy who sometimes still roamed the halls of the house, the one I needed to heal in order to move forward.

“Tiffany,” he growled, his gray eyes drilling into me. “Don’t push your luck.”

“Master.” My tone was hard as I reached for his jaw and caressed the soft stubble there. “Either my luck ran out the day you ensconced yourself in my house, or I’m the luckiest woman in the world, but either way, it’s not running out today.”

A gleam of amusement flashed in his gaze, and he shook his head as he leaned into my hand. “When did you get so smart, little girl?”

“I’ve always been smart, Master,” I reminded him. “You just liked to see me as a dumb fuck toy, but I’m not. Never have been and never will be.”

“I wouldn’t have fallen for a dumb fuck toy the way I’ve fallen for you.” Kissing my fingertips, his lips curled.

“I guess not,” I replied, trying not to think of the countless other women he’d attacked and discarded—the ones he hadn’t fallen for.

“We need to clean this up.” Motioning to the ground, he swept me into his arms before I could answer. “It’s not safe for you to walk around.”

“But, Master,” I complained as he hoisted me higher and placed me on the other sofa. “What about Lucas?”

“She’ll be fine,” he replied without so much as glancing back at the unconscious detective. “I didn’t give her much.”

“She’s flat on her face,” I argued. “Probably not the best position for her airway?” Pausing, I waited for him to register the logic of my case. Processing my point, he duly turned back to look at her.

“Okay, fine.” He sighed, striding to where she was strewn. Rolling her onto one side, he balanced her body across the seats before rising to his full height. “Better?”

“Can you remove her binds, Master?”

“Why?” He glared at me as though I was insane. “You wouldn’t make a good captor, little girl.”

He had a fair point.

“I just think that the sedative is strong enough to do the job.” I shrugged. “That’s all.”

“I’ll loosen them,” he growled as he turned and created slack in the ropes.

“Thank you, Master.” At least she wouldn’t choke on her own vomit in the new position.

“Now, wait.” He pointed to me as if I were a dog, a gesture that would have been gloriously erotic had it not been for the comatose woman opposite. “I’ll be back with the dustpan and brush.”

A man on a mission, he stalked away, leaving me and Lucas alone in the room. I considered creeping from my place and checking on her but could see the rise and fall of her chest from where I stood. Glancing to the syringe, I wondered what he'd pumped her full of, but knew if it was the same sedative he'd given me the night he brought me to Barrington, Lucas would be out for the count for hours to come.

"Did you move?" His brow rose as he stood in the doorway.

"No, Master."

"Good." His features softened as he fell to his knees to collect the glass.

Watching him work it struck me how ridiculously sexy the man was. Clearing away the shards meticulously, he worked quietly and efficiently, all in the name of protecting me. Snuggling under my blanket, I tried to make sense of everything that had happened. He should be a complete anathema—an example of everything I loathed—yet every time Kade took me to a new limit, he managed to rip right through and push my boundaries even farther away. He'd drugged Lucas for no reason, yet even now, I was softening to the idea.

"There." Rising, he put the dustpan on the counter out of the way. "I'll need to vacuum, but it's better. You should still watch where you walk for now, though."

"Yes, Master," I replied, watching as his attention drifted back to the detective. "What do you want to do with her?"

"I haven't decided."

That sounded ominous.

"We could let her go?" I suggested, even though it was hardly helpful.

Kade had made his insane choice, and she was already sleeping off a dose of whatever he'd pushed into her bloodstream. Whatever happened, letting her go seemed

unlikely. A woman in her position would understandably go straight to the authorities. Hell, any sane person would.

“No.” Wandering to me, he perched on the arm of the sofa. “She’s a cop. She could never have walked away from Barrington.”

The knot of anxiety in my tummy tightened. “So, you plan to *keep* her?”

How on Earth was this going to work? We’d only just started to make a decent go of our relationship—having another person in the house, someone he was holding against their will, sounded untenable.

“No.” His voice lowered. “She’ll have to go.”

“Master.” Alarm exploded in my chest, surging up my windpipe until it was difficult to breathe. “What are you saying?”

“You know what I’m saying.” He glanced at me, his expression neither triumphant nor sorry. “We need to be rid of her.”

“You mean k-kill her?” I didn’t know why it was so important that he say the words out loud, but I needed to hear them, to understand properly what he intended.

“Yes.” Again, there wasn’t a flicker of regret in his voice, but then I had to remember, this wasn’t Kade’s first time. “Don’t worry, little girl. I’ll deal with it. You don’t have to be involved.”

“But I *am* involved,” I panted. “Master, I live here with you... this is our home.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I’m well aware, having brought you here myself.”

“Under similar circumstances,” I mumbled, concluding the sentence for him.

“I never intended to hurt you.” His tone was emphatic. “Would never, *could* never harm you beyond the punishments

we both crave.”

“Yet you can still contemplate murder?” Voice wavering, I signaled to Lucas. “She hasn’t done anything wrong, Master. She shouldn’t die, not like this.”

“Tiffany.” Sighing, he slid down the arm and landed by my feet. Reaching for my blanket covered leg, he held me. “If I don’t take her out of the equation, she’ll bring the whole house of cards down around us.”

“But she has no proof of anything,” I countered. “If she did, she’d have come with back up and arrested you.”

“She has an instinct.” His gaze locked with mine. “You heard her say it herself. She knows I’m guilty of something, and she won’t let it go until she’s uncovered my lawbreaking.” His brow furrowed. “The irony is, she’s a good cop. That’s her only crime.”

“Oh God.” Closing my eyes, I realized he was right. Detectives like Lucas reminded me of blood hounds. They wouldn’t lose the scent until they’d gotten to the bottom of it. Given enough rope, I had little doubt that she would use it to hang him. “But I can’t...” Grief swelled in my chest, threatening to rob me of breath.

“I told you,” he countered. “You won’t have to get your hands dirty. I’ll do the deed, little girl.”

“That’s not how the law works, Master,” I choked, opening my lids to meet his eyes again. “Involvement is complicity.” Why was I even discussing this? “If I simply sit back and do nothing to stop or report you, then I’m as guilty as you.”

“Look, I know you have a conscience.” Edging up the sofa, his hand snuck under the blanket and grazed my skin. “That and your passion are two of the things I love about you the most, Tiffany. So, you’ll have to take it from a devil like me—we cannot let her leave and report any of this. We don’t want to flag our existence to the authorities again, let alone our

whereabouts. Barrington House is off the radar, and that's the way it needs to stay."

"Master, I know, but—"

"But nothing," he interjected in the hard tone I knew so well. "She's already unconscious. There'll be no pain or suffering. Hell, she won't even know what happened."

"But you'll snub her out, regardless?"

Suddenly, it was all clear. This was the man I loved—or at least the monster who lurked inside him. I could develop the loving tender side of him, but deep down, the fiend would always exist. If I wanted to be with him, I had to accept that. Kade would never be entirely redeemable.

One of his hands rose to my hair, fisting it gently.

"I'll do whatever I have to do to protect you." His gaze felt as if it was penetrating my soul. "To protect us. If that means killing the cop, then so be it. I'm no hero, little girl—you already know that—but perhaps now, you understand what it really means."

"Master." Tears fell from my eyes, but I didn't have the will to stop them. The sorrow burgeoned until a peculiar numbness settled.

"I will raze the world to the ground to keep you safe, Tiffany." Loosening his grip on my tresses, he cradled the side of my face. "Nobody will ever disturb our peace again."

Chapter Nineteen

Kade

Blinking away her tears, she pressed her cheek into my palm. “But how can we live with ourselves, Master?”

You get used to it.

The answer rattled around my head, and although it never made my lips, it was no less true.

“We talk to each other,” I soothed, knowing just how much magic there was in our communication. Before Tiffany, I had kept everything bottled up inside, but I’d never need to shoulder the burden alone again. “We listen to the other, but more than that, we understand the reasons why this has happened.”

“It doesn’t make it right, Master.” Her voice was hoarse with desperation. “It doesn’t justify killing someone.”

“Complicity is not the same as murder.” Catching her tears with my thumb, I wiped them away. “We both know that. You will not be responsible.”

“But I’ll live with the man who is,” she wept. “I’ll love him.”

“Yes,” I replied, offering no greater solace than my affirmation. “You will.”

“How?” Hurt glimmered in her wonderful eyes. “How can I live with that, Master?”

“Shhh,” I reassured, aware of how upset she’d become. “You’ll make yourself ill, little girl.” Adjusting my gun, I perched beside her and pulled her onto my lap as she sobbed.

“I can’t help it, Master.” Choking on her words, she pulled in a breath. “I don’t know how to deal with this.”

“The same way you dealt with the others.” I shrugged, unable to think of a way to sugar coat my explanation.

“The others?”

“Hyde Park.” I was surprised that I had to remind her. “You were rightly upset and angry about the events there, but in the end, you normalized them. You even managed to find a way to help me let go of the trauma.”

Her eyes widened, as though the news was a revelation. “Normalized?” A shiver ran through her body, compelling me to hold her closer. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you took it on board, little girl.” Kissing her crown, I continued. “You didn’t like it, but you found ways to reconcile, and you’ll do so again.”

“Make excuses, you mean?” She shook her head against my chest. “You’re right, Master. I’ve made excuses for you since day one.”

“You’re distressed, Tiffany.” My tone carried caution. “But let’s not let this degenerate into a matter that needs to be addressed over my knee.”

“You’d do that?” She glanced up with watery eyes. “Spank me while she’s sprawled out unconscious over there?”

“I’ll always do whatever needs to be done, little girl.” Capturing her chin, I drew her focus back to me as her gaze started to fall. “If you need to be spanked, then so be it. She’s not going anywhere.” I gestured to the hapless detective.

“Master.” Recoiling from my touch, her hand rose to her face. “I can’t do this, can’t just stand by and watch you butcher another innocent woman.”

“You’re right.”

It was like a lightbulb moment, her words crystalizing things in my head. Lucas needed dealing with, and Tiffany would be of no use to me during the deed. I couldn’t leave her there wailing and crying about the injustice. She needed to be managed until the detective was out of the equation. With a

smile, the solution came to me. I didn't know why I hadn't thought of it before.

"Wh-What?" she gasped, evidently unprepared for the response. "What do you mean, Master?"

"I mean, I agree." Stroking her jaw, I swore I had never loved her more than at this moment. "You can't just stay and watch."

Her brow creased, but I didn't have the time or inclination to answer her queries. She would understand my intention soon enough.

"Come on then."

I rose to my feet, hoisting her into the air with me. She yelped at the change of tack, gripping onto me, then her blanket as I moved to the door.

"Master!" Clinging to my shirt, her breath was ragged as I paced down the hall. "What's happening?"

"I'm helping you."

Resolved to my plan, I held her closer, knowing soon she would start to resist. I was loathed to inspire more defiance in my little girl, but for what I needed to do, there was no other choice. Tiffany had said it herself—she couldn't be part of Lucas' end.

"How?" Her gaze darted around as we neared the monochrome room, I'd designed with her in mind.

"By distracting you." I grinned as I pushed the door open with my shoulder.

"Master?" Her voice was frantic as she acknowledged where we were and what that might mean. "We can't—not now—not with Lucas in the next room!"

"You don't need to worry about Lucas anymore," I told her as I pushed the door closed with my foot. "She's my concern."

"But..." she started, wiggling in my arms.

Carrying her to the leather bench I'd first bound her to when I'd brought her to Barrington, I lowered her to her feet.

"What are you going to do? We can't play now, we need to—"

"Hush," I interrupted. "You need to be quiet and listen."

"Okay." Pressing the blanket to her, she glanced up with large, emotional eyes.

"Okay, what?" I demanded. She knew how to address me, especially in this room.

"Okay, Master."

She flicked her wrist as though the way she spoke to me was not important. Steeling myself for the battle to come, I let the disappointment go. I had bigger fish to fry.

"This is how it's going to go." It was funny how things worked out. I'd had no idea at the start of the evening that this was how it would transpire. The only things that had been on my mind then had been punishing and feeding Tiffany. I hadn't anticipated a crazy detective breaking into my house and altering the course of events.

"I'm going to deal with Lucas, and you're going to stay here."

"No, Master." Her chest rose and fell as she readied herself to make her case. "I can't stay here. We have to talk about this, have to—"

"No." Pressing my fingertip to her mouth, I effectively ended her point. "I got us into this mess." It was true whether I meant the unravelling situation tonight or the reason the detective was sniffing around in the first place. It was all me. "I'll be the one to get us out."

"Master, no." Her shoulders slumped, the first tangible sign that she accepted defeat. Tiffany was strong and capable, but she was also a realist. I was the only one with a key to this room, and there was no way she could outmaneuver or outrun me. If I said she stayed, then she stayed. "Don't do this."

“I am doing this,” I confirmed. “And I’d ask that you don’t try to defy me, little girl. Stay and have your pleasure until your master returns.”

“Pleasure?” She practically spat out the word. “How can I enjoy anything while I know what you’re doing? I’ll be stuck in here, and you’ll be doing God knows what out there.”

“You’ll be safe,” I reminded her. “And the less you know about what happened to Lucas, the better. You’ll never have to lie for me, Tiffany. You’ll be able to say, hand on heart, you had no idea.”

“It’s not that simple, Master,” she argued. “I’ll still know the outcome. I’ll still have to cover for you and think about where that leaves me professionally—running prosecutions when it’s the man I love who deserves to be in the dock.”

“Well, that’s always been the case.”

That seemed to stop her in her tracks, and sensing an advantage, I pressed on.

“You knew about the others, yet you stayed with me. You knew, yet you went back to work. This will be no different.”

“I’m not going to let you do this.”

She dashed past me, heading for the door, but I spun, catching her arm and yanking her back. Stumbling into me, she mewled as I cushioned her landing and forced her arms behind her back.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to convince you this way, but you’ve left me no choice, little girl.”

My sigh was more for theatrics, but it worked as I dragged her toward the bench and forced her to sit on the leather. A fresh sob caught in her throat as I secured first one wrist into the waiting rope loop, before persuading the other one to comply.

“No!” she waited, pulling against the rope, but after all the time she’d spent in the room, she should have known better. The gesture was counterintuitive since all tugging achieved

was tightening the binds at her wrists. The irony was that if she'd only relax, her tiny wrists might have been able to slip free.

"You already know it's a yes," I replied, wrestling with her right leg as I secured her ankle into the cuff. I captured her remaining free limb with ease, grappling it into submission. The binds ensured her thighs couldn't touch, and as I angled the back of the bench down, her pussy was revealed in all its glory.

"You're going to stay whether you like it or not." Walking to the cabinet I collected a vibrator and a roll of bondage tape. "Just like you're going to have the pleasure." Placing the tip of the device against her sex, I secured it with the tape, making sure there was no way she could break free of its torment.

"Don't do this, Master," she begged as I turned back to my box of tricks.

Selecting one of her largest ball gags, I returned, dangling it in the air for her to see.

"You know I love to hear you beg, little girl." Winking at her, I reached down and flicked the vibrator on. Tiffany's response was immediate, her body jerking and her nipples tightening as the pulsing sensation goaded her clit. "Christ, you look good like this."

"Please."

I didn't know if she was pleading with me to let her come or to make it stop, but it hardly mattered.

"Please, Master."

Leaning closer, I held the plastic ball between my thumb and forefinger before gently squeezing her nostrils closed. Panic flashed in her eyes, her blue gaze widening as she struggled against her binds. My cock thickened as I watched her thrashing, the show quite a distraction from the real business of the night.

“Open,” I cautioned. “Open up and take your gag. Master has things he needs to do.”

“Oooo,” she refused, shaking her head left and right to reinforce the point, but we both knew it was only a matter of time. Tiffany couldn’t survive without air for long, and I was well known to be a patient man.

As soon as her lips parted, I shoved the ball between them, forcing her mouth around its girth as I tightened the straps and secured the gag in place. Glancing around, I walked to the thermostat and edged up the heat. The room was kept a regular temperature, but my little girl was naked, and I wanted to make sure she didn’t catch a chill. Turning back, I took in the awe-inspiring sight of her struggle.

“You’re as sexy as fuck,” I muttered, rueful to have to leave her.

The only consolation was the multiple cameras I had around the room, and the knowledge that I’d be able to enjoy the erotic display at another time.

“Now, stay there and come for me.” Striding to where she was bound, I grazed my palm over her chest before lengthening both of her eager nipples. Groaning, she writhed harder, pushing her clit into the plastic tormentor. “When I’m done, I’ll come back and claim what’s mine.”

Chapter Twenty

Lucas

The first thing I noticed was the banging in my head. It felt as if I'd drunk too many whiskeys, even though I had no recollection of drinking any. I'd been on duty, hadn't I? Brows knitted, I tried to remember. No, not duty, but something similar, a personal quest to identify the bad guy. So, what the hell had happened?

“Fuck.”

I wanted to lift my hand to my head and ease away the pain, but for some reason, my limb wouldn't move. Wiggling my fingers, I realized with horror that I couldn't move either arm. What the fuck had happened?

Forcing my eyes open, I took in the sight of an unknown room. It looked like a den, filled with sofas and soft furnishings, but it wasn't mine and didn't look like it belonged to anyone I knew. Trying to think, I strained my memory for clues. A vague recollection of my meeting with D.C.I. Baron stirred, reminding me that I hadn't been at work this week. Why was I in this strange place?

“What happened?” I whispered, conscious of how dry my throat was.

Using whatever strength I had left, I compelled myself upright, ignoring the wave of nausea that threatened as the world righted itself around me. Things were a little clearer, the memory of following a suspect exploding into my head, but who? Glancing around the room for clues, I rose on shaky legs and regretted the action. Stumbling for the open door, I rested against the wall, tugging harder at whatever held my hands behind me. Wherever I was, I had to get away. Something ominous had happened. I wouldn't be tied up for fun since I

wasn't into any of the kinky fuckery of the Noble case, which meant—

Brow furrowing, I backtracked, trying to decide why the idea had resonated. The Noble case—which was that? The one where the woman had been stalked and abducted by the creep hiding in her attic. An involuntary shiver raced along my spine. She had seemed to enjoy Walker's dark attention, including the ropes he brought with him, but they did nothing for me. I didn't—

“Shit, that's it.” Scanning the room again, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. “The Noble case. I went after the perpetrator. That's how I ended up here.”

This is his house.

The final sentence echoed through my brain like a death bell. He'd put me in these binds and drugged me. A wave of terror washed over me as I realized how much trouble I was in. I had to get out of the binds and get the hell away.

Yanking harder, I pulled until the fetters cut into my flesh, the pain making me wince, but to my surprise, the effort created slack in the binds, enough space for one wrist to wiggle free. Stretching my fingers, I unwound the rope from my other wrist before discarding it to the floor. I watched it fall to the ground, missing the expensive-looking rug by a few inches and landing on the hard wood. Watching its landing place, my attention was drawn to something yellow, and turning, I recognized it.

“My taser!”

A surge of hope burst through me as I collected it and examined the weapon. Everything appeared to be still working—the one beacon of light in my increasingly dark situation. Slipping out of the door, I glanced both ways along the dark corridor. I couldn't remember which way led back to the bathroom window I'd used to gain entry, but I knew one thing—I had to get the hell out of there before Walker returned.

Lurching forward, I headed into the darkness, searching for anything about the hall that I recalled. One hand skimming the wall, I gripped the taser in the other. Walker had gotten ahead of me once before, but I'd be damned before I let him have the upper hand again.

Kade

It took every ounce of my willpower to shut the door and leave Tiffany. She looked red hot—bound and gagged and pleading with me with her big blue eyes—and to make things even more enticing, the sound of her first orgasm resounded as I closed the door. There was no need to lock it. My little girl wouldn't be going anywhere until I said so.

Lips curling, I headed back to the den, steering my thoughts back to what needed to be done. Lucas had to go, and this was the time to decide how. My gun was one possibility, but I'd personally never been a fan of firearms. That was why I'd strangled all the other women—it meant I had time to watch the lights go out and revel in all those tiny details. Guns were too fast and messy. You couldn't appreciate the small gasps and desperate pleas. I liked to work with my hands, which was why Lucas would go the same way as all the others.

I never thought I'd be on the verge of taking a life again. Meeting Tiffany had changed me and ebbed at my desire to kill until it was nothing but a sorry recollection. In one short evening, D.S. Lucas had turned all that on its head. It wasn't that I sought her destruction or hungered to kill. It was more that Lucas left me with no choice.

She came to my house and stuck her nose in my business, but clearly, the detective hadn't heeded the lesson of our feline friends. It was curiosity that had killed the cat, and now, Lucas

had to pay for her nosiness. I knew what had to be done and was reconciled to the task ahead. I'd strangle her while she was asleep. It would be over before either of us knew it.

The thought buoyed me as I crossed the threshold into the small family room, my gaze flitting to the sofa. It took a couple of seconds for my brain to register the fact that she wasn't there.

She wasn't there!

Alarm exploded inside me. Where was she? I intentionally hadn't given her a huge dose of sedative but hadn't expected it to wear off so quickly.

Senses heightened, I searched the room for any sign of Lucas, but unsurprisingly, she was nowhere to be found. The woman was a detective, for fuck's sake. She knew better than to loiter in dangerous situations. Depending on when she roused, she could be long gone at this point, and mentally, I thanked myself for binding her wrists.

"Although you loosened them," I reminded myself though gritted teeth, and turning, I noticed the evidence on the floor. Curled in a ball were the ropes Lucas had managed to wiggle free from. "Against your better judgment."

Shit.

Frustration abounded as I stalked from the room, switching on lights as I passed. Wherever Lucas was, she would still be under the influence of the cocktail I gave her, which gave me hope. I would find her and deal with her. It just wasn't going to be as simple as I'd initially anticipated.

Marching past rooms, I stopped at each one, illuminating the space and listening for any sound that might indicate my unwelcome guest. Anxiety churned in my stomach with each passing failure, the weight of the predicament pressing down on me. If Lucas had gotten out of her binds, she could have found her way out of the house, could be fleeing back to her vehicle, and then what?

"She doesn't know anything."

The so-called reassurance did little to console. She knew enough. Her instincts about me had proven to be right—and as if that wasn't bad enough, I'd just added a new list of felonies to her list. Non-consensual tethering and drugging were generally frowned upon, especially in the police service.

It wasn't until I approached my office that I heard the noise, the shuffling of feet on the carpet, the gasping panicked breaths of a woman in trouble, and possibly of fingers grasping the windowpane in a futile attempt to open them. Little did Lucas know, with the exception of the one entry point she'd already exploited, nowhere in my house was an easy escape route. The windows in my study were locked, as were all the others on the property. I'd only left the downstairs bathroom one open to air the space—a mistake I wouldn't make again.

Slowing my pace, I pressed my back to the wall and edged closer. I could take a little woman like Lucas without much effort, but I was still guarded. Things would be easier if my advance was unexpected. Reaching the end of the wall, I peered around the door, expecting to see her silhouette there at the window, trying to break free, but to my confusion, there was no one.

Where are you?

I'd definitely heard someone in the room, and it had to be Lucas. Tiffany was well occupied in her playroom, and I'd have heard her if she'd managed to make a run for it. No, this was our friend, the detective.

“Come and play!”

Ditching the idea of taking her unaware, I sent my taunting tone resounding through the dark space. Reaching around the door, I felt for the light switch, casting bright illumination around the space.

“I know you're in there, Detective.” I laughed, easing into my natural predatory role. “I only want to talk.”

“I’ve learned all I need to know about your desire to talk.” Her voice echoed from behind the door, giving away her hiding place. “I figure now’s the time for action.”

I couldn’t have put it any better myself.

“Agreed.” Inching forward, I grasped the door handle. “Come out and let’s get on with it.”

“Is that what we’re going to do?” Her droll chuckle surprised me. After capturing her once, I would have anticipated at least a flicker of fear. “I’d better come out then.” She appeared in a heartbeat, glaring at me as she pushed into my space. “Just as well I came prepared.”

Glancing down, I registered the yellow device in her hands, although I didn’t immediately understand what it was.

“It’s time you had a lie down, Walker.”

Realizing too late what weapon she clutched, I reached for my gun, but the move was futile. A shooting, excruciating pain landed where the taser hit and stunned, I fell to the ground. Every muscle of my body contracted, spiraling my senses into panic. I tried to open my mouth and scream, but couldn’t muster the sound, the feeling of stinging animals crawling under my skin consuming all my effort and attention.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It hurt like hell!

“There!” From some distant place her triumphant tone reverberated. “How do you like that? It’s about time you knew what it was like to be the victim.”

I’m not a victim.

The answer played out in my head as the aftermath of the electricity ricocheted. The intensity of the blast was over, but my limbs were heavy, and I couldn’t contemplate climbing to my feet.

The gun, I reminded myself. If I could just reach my pocket for my gun, I could put an end to all of this. Sure, I liked to relish the minute details of the end, but it didn’t

matter. This was about self-defense, and Lucas had broken in. I was well within my rights to put a bullet in her.

“I’m going to need a little time with your girlfriend,” she sneered and opening my eyes I realized she loomed above me. “So that means you need to have a little sleep.”

Groaning, I moved my arm in an attempt to reach the right pocket, but Lucas was one step ahead of me.

“What are you doing, pretty boy?” Kicking my hand away, she pointed the taser at my head as she lowered to search me. “Got something in there, have we?”

“Fuck you.”

I wasn’t sure if I said the words out loud. All I knew was they were the only protest I was capable of as she rolled me over and rummaged through my pocket.

“What’s this?” Pulling my gun free, she dangled it above my head. “I hope you have a license for this, Mr. Walker.” Her snigger echoed around me. “Never mind, we’ll worry about that later.”

Turning, she slid the weapon across the hall, its hasty pursuit aided by my beautiful wood flooring. I watched helplessly as it slipped out of my grasp. The sound of her laughter bounced off the walls long after she’d left me sprawled there. The gun might only have been a few meters away, but in my current predicament, it might as well have been a hundred miles. I ached to crawl to it, turn and take out the woman who’d caused such catastrophe, but even lifting my hand seemed an incredible effort.

“Now, let’s give you something else to think about, shall we?”

Wincing, I rolled in the direction of her voice, noticing my crystal decanter in her hands. “Wh-What are you doing?” I gasped, willing myself to sit upright and take it from her.

“I already told you.” Lucas had the audacity to wink at me as she held the crystal over my head. “Giving you a little

sleeping time.”

“No.” Lifting my arm to defend myself, I mewed as I saw the expensive glassware headed straight for me. The last thing I registered before the lights went out was what a mess it was going to make if it shattered.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tiffany

The enormous plastic ball muffled my screams as my body stiffened for the latest impending pleasure. It was my seventh orgasm, and as good as that sounded on paper, the reality was much harder to endure. If it was true that you could be killed with kindness, perhaps that was what Kade was doing to me, although he had a proven track record in this area and reveled in the chance to leave me coming over and over.

But this is different, my brain warned me as I heaved in ribbons of air through my nostrils. This isn't a kinky game. He's going to kill Lucas. You have to get free!

Instructing my limbs to relax as much as the evil pulsating plastic allowed, I focused my energy on the loops at my wrists. The left bind wasn't as tight as the right, and if I clenched my fist and wiggled, I could almost snake it from the fetters.

Come on, I willed, straining around the gag.

Of course, I loved the bondage and humiliation, but this wasn't the time. My pleasure couldn't be used as a tonic to murder. Wringing every ounce of focus I had left in my body, I just managed to slip my wrist free as the next wave of hedonism loomed.

"Oooo!" I hollered as the plastic tormentor pushed my clit back over the precipice, my body lurching as I jerked in place.

Reaching between my legs, I yanked the damn vibrator away, sending it crashing to the floor with the tape still attached. Catching my breath, I watched as it continued to buzz, dancing around the tiles like a feral animal. Tugging at the strap that held the gag in place, I eased the giant ball from

my lips, gasping as it fell to my collar bone. Working the buckle loose, it soon joined the vibrator on the floor.

“Thank fuck,” I panted, using my left hand to loosen the ropes at my other wrist.

Exhausted, I leaned forward, unbuckling my ankles from their fetters before I rose on shaky legs. There was no time to stop and catch my breath. I had to pray Kade hadn't locked the door and get out there to stop Lucas' death. Lurching forward, I grasped the handle and yanked it open. Relief flooded my system as I realized I was free and possibly able to prevent another unnecessary death. Grabbing a long cardigan from the nearby rail I pulled the fabric over my arms before stumbling on. I had no idea where I was heading and scarcely knew what I was heading into, but it didn't matter. There had been so much death already. I had to stop him.

Bizarrely, every corridor was brightly illuminated as if Kade had been there before me, switching all the lights on. My brow creased. That didn't sound like the Kade I knew. He usually favored a covert approach. Anxiety rippled in my belly. I wasn't sure if the idea of my master being challenged was welcomed or not. Lucas should have been on the couch where he'd left her. It should have been simple, yet experience had taught me that things so rarely were.

Exhaling, I wrapped my arms around my middle, anxious to stifle the rising sense of unease. Kade had ruled over me with an iron fist. We'd had more ups and downs than most couples had in decades together, and yet fundamentally he was right—Lucas was a threat to everything we had—and although I didn't agree with his murderous intent, she did have to be stopped.

Fiddling with the buttons of the cardigan at my chest, I crept forward along the halls. My heart raced as I passed empty rooms, each of them eerily lit although no one was inside. Barrington was an endless maze, with countless unused spaces, many of which I still hadn't properly explored, but why would he have left lights on everywhere? Kade had

seemed hellbent on destroying Lucas when he'd left me, so the light show in every part of the house didn't make sense.

"Something's wrong," I whispered, finding consolation in releasing some of my trepidation. "Maybe I'm too late? Perhaps he's already killed her?"

My questions were partly answered as I turned the corner toward his study. There, sprawled out on the floor at the other end of the corridor was a body, but as my feet sped up, I realized it wasn't Lucas'. Dread ballooned as I broke into a sprint, my feet kicking something that had been discarded on the floor. Glancing back, my pulse spiked as I realized it was a gun. *A gun?* The horrific thought reverberated around my head as I dashed to him. Why was there a gun in the house?

"Master!" I fell to my knees beside him, rolling him toward me. "Oh, God! What's happened? Have you been shot?"

Looking around him, there was no obvious gunshot and thankfully, no evidence of blood loss. Lifting my palm to his mouth, I sagged with relief as I sensed his breath on my skin. He was asleep then, not dead.

Clearing his long hair from his face, I noticed the red swollen mark on his temple and in those few seconds, the whole scenario fell into place. Kade had come back to kill Lucas, but she'd already woken up—the dose of sedative not as efficient as he'd hoped—and she'd managed to get free of the ropes.

That was my fault.

I blanched, recalling how I'd pleaded with him to loosen her binds and imagining how she'd used her liberty to good effect as she knocked my lover out with something heavy. Glancing into the study, it was easy to see what she'd chosen—his crystal decanter was discarded on the rug and Lucas was nowhere to be seen.

This had gotten out of hand. Whatever my ethics about either Kade's or Lucas' actions, I couldn't allow it to go on.

Reaching into his pocket, I pulled his out his phone and dialed the emergency services.

“What’s your emergency?” The monotonic voice on the other end of the line burst into my eardrum.

“Someone has broken into the house,” I blurted, barely able to hear my response over the pounding of my heart. “My boyfriend is unconscious.”

“Are you in danger?” The unknown voice asked.

Was I?

“Y-Yes,” I panted. “I think I am.”

“Is your boyfriend breathing?”

I glanced down at Kade’s chest, reassured to see its natural rise and fall.

“Yes, he is.”

“Then find somewhere to hide. With a little time, we’ll be able to track your location from your phone and—”

I didn’t hear the rest of his sentence, although I was aware of the responder still speaking. All my focus shifted to the back of my head, or to be more precise, the hard implement thrust against it.

Shit.

I knew without having to turn around that it was the barrel of the gun.

“Hang up the phone,” Lucas growled, pressing the barrel harder into my skull.

Ignoring the surge of nausea that swelled in my tummy, I ended the call on autopilot. I didn’t know if the operator had garnered enough information to track us down or if Kade’s phone could even be used that way. He was a master at anonymity and the thought occurred that it might not be possible for the emergency services to find us. We could be on our own.

“Give it to me.” Her voice resonated from behind me.

With a trembling hand, I lifted Kade’s phone toward it, tensing as she snatched it away.

“What have you done to him?”

Anxiety melted to anger—a familiar rage that bubbled as I processed the reality of the evening. Lucas had thought that she had the right to come in here and do this. She was supposed to be a police officer—a woman of the law. If she’d had genuine concerns about my wellbeing, she could have sent a team of officers to check in on me. She should have known better, should have done better.

“He’s fine,” she spat as a sudden noise drew my focus from his sleeping form.

Ignoring the gun still pressed to my head, I turned to see his phone thrown to the ground, her boot crushing the screen under her weight.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, surrendering to the growing fury. “I guess we can add criminal damage to the breaking and entering and assault charges, huh?”

“Did you know he had a gun?” Removing the weapon, she took a step back and allowed me to rise to my feet.

What, wait—that was Kade’s gun?

“Your expression says no.” She had the audacity to laugh as she pointed it at me.

“If it’s his gun, then why is it in your hands?” Gaze narrowing, I met her stare. Lucas didn’t frighten me. I had dealt with much bigger devils than her, and frankly, she looked more out of her depth than I felt.

“Self-defense.”

“As a prosecutor, let me give you some advice.” My brow rose as I stepped away from Kade’s body. “You’re going to need a better explanation than that.”

“Why are you still protecting him?” she hissed.

“Why are you so obsessed with him?” I barked back.
“You have no real reason to be here.”

“He drugged me!” she countered, as if that justified pulling a deadly weapon on me.

“He’s an asshole sometimes. Never said he wasn’t, and I certainly don’t always agree with his approach, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

Brow furrowing, she lowered the weapon to my feet. “I think he’s responsible for more than only your abduction.” She met my eyes. “I came looking for evidence.” A poor excuse by anyone’s standards.

“We both know that you need a warrant to find evidence.” She was a D.S., for God’s sake, not a rookie Constable. Lucas already knew that. “Anything you find here wouldn’t be admissible.”

“Fuck.” Her expression crumpled, regret flashing in her eyes, and for the first time, a pang of sympathy swelled for her. “What have I done?”

“Look, I get it.” I shrugged. “You’re only trying to do your job.”

“Yeah, but you’re right.” She sounded hysterical—not a reassuring thought when she was holding the gun. “I’ve really fucked up.”

“Come on.” Moving to her, I patted her on the shoulder, deciding to handle this in the most British way I could think of. “Why don’t we go and put the kettle on?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lucas

Everything was unravelling around me, and the worst of it all was, it was all down to me.

“You look pale.”

Glancing up at her, I watched her pouring the tea from the pot into two cups.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s just shock.” Shivering, I pulled the blanket she’d offered me tighter around my shoulders, my gaze traveling back to the gun on the counter. “I can’t believe I pulled a gun on you. I’m so sorry.”

“We’ve all been pulled a little out of shape tonight.” Smiling, she slid the cup toward me.

“It’s no excuse.” I’d always despised guns, refusing an invite to the firearm division for that exact reason. I’d been disorientated and angry when I’d come around from the sedative, but it didn’t justify my actions. After all, Noble was a victim. She hadn’t pushed the drug into me. “I feel awful.”

“Drink your tea, Detective.” She sighed, perching on the stool opposite me.

“Why are you being so nice?” I asked, wrapping my cold hands around the hot cup. I’d watched her check on Walker, covering him with a throw from the lounge before putting him to the recovering position. She clearly cared about him. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Because I know what it’s like to be sedated by Kade.” Her gaze darted to the kitchen door as though she expected to see him looming in it. Maybe she did.

“That’s how he got you back here.” It all made sense as it unfolded in my head. “You didn’t come back by choice.”

“No.” She sipped at her drink. “But I’ve stayed willingly every day since. I’m happy being with him. I know you don’t understand, and I get why, but I want you know that I am.”

“Does he treat you well now?”

Noble was a case of Stockholm Syndrome gone mad. I’d met captives who’d become obsessed with their captors, but she was off the charts crazy in love with the psycho who’d holed up in her house.

“Yes.” Her eyes lit up. “Yes, he does. We love each other, and I know we can be happy, Detective.”

“Then I guess I was wrong to worry about you.”

“I guess so.”

“But I don’t think I was wrong about the other stuff.”

“What other stuff?” She shifted on her seat before leaning closer.

“About him. I know he’s guilty of other crimes. I can’t tell you how, but I just do.”

“I know a detective’s experience can shape their ability to do their job. Perhaps your experience has sharpened your senses.”

What did that mean?

“That’s right,” I said, seizing on her apparent acquiescence. “That’s precisely what it’s done, and my senses say he’s done this before... or worse.”

“Worse?” She tilted her head as she asked, giving me the distinct impression that she was toying with me, that she knew more than she was letting on.

“Worse than kidnap,” I clarified. “Aggravated assault, maybe even murder.”

“Murder?” Her brow rose. “Why would you say that? Do you have a body?”

She had me there.

“No,” I admitted. “Nothing new, but inevitably there’s a wealth of cold cases that have his signature all over them.”

“Then, if I might say so, it sounds as though your time would have been better spent at the office, working those cases, Detective.”

Another good point. Shit.

“I had some leave due to me.” Wait, why was I justifying myself to her? Noble was a victim turned defender of the latest wacko who’d crossed my path. “So, I came down here for a few days.”

“And thought you’d check out Kade?” Her voice was wry.

“Exactly.” Lifting my cup, I took a sip, watching her from over the rim.

“And can I ask what you plan to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

I was grateful for the hot drink but was still so infernally cold. My gaze traveled back to the weapon on the counter, cursing myself for ever picking the damn thing up, but I couldn’t let her call the authorities. I’d have had colleagues crawling all over the place and how would Walker’s unconscious body look then?

“Now that you’ve knocked him out and decided I’m okay, what’s your plan?”

“I...” Hesitating, my brows knitted. I didn’t have a plan. “I didn’t really get that far.”

“Are you planning to leave?” She motioned to the glass doors behind her. “On walking away from us and not looking back? Or...” Pausing, her stare met mine. “Are you planning on taking whatever you think you’ve learned back to your superiors?”

“I can’t just sit on what I know, Tiffany.” Indignation sparked in my voice. “Can’t ignore what I know to be true.”

“And what’s that?” she pressed. “We’ve already established that you have no evidence against him.”

“I have the fact that he bound and drugged me,” I countered.

“And the fact that you entered his property without permission,” she argued, her voice annoyingly calm. “And your recent assault of him.”

“*He* had a gun!” I snapped, outraged that she was somehow painting me as the bad guy.

“He pulled the gun on you?” Leaning back, she waited for me to answer, her tone neither supportive nor reproachful.

Fleeting, I considered lying and making it sound as if he’d threatened me with the weapon—she’d never know the truth after all—but I stopped myself, scarcely believing the woman I’d become. I’d gotten into this job to do the right thing. When had I become such a duplicitous and conniving person?

“No,” I confessed, reaching for my head and rubbing away the impending tension headache. “It was on his person when he came looking for me.”

“You can see my point then?” She folded her arms across her chest. “The best you have, Detective, is an impasse—your word against his and not much else.”

“What about your word?” I demanded. “You know the things he’s done... what he’s capable of?”

“I’m in love with him,” she reminded me. “I’ve never pressed charges, and you’ll never convince me to speak for the prosecution.”

“I know.” Shit. My shoulders fell as wearily I accepted the truth. For reasons only known to her, Noble was a lost cause. She’d never help us nail Walker. My entire pursuit had been a waste of time.

“But I hope you can see my point, as well? The man you’re entangled with is trouble, Miss Noble. I’d be willing to wager my pension that you’re not the first woman he’s stalked and attacked. Somewhere out there are other victims and they deserve justice.” My words hung in the air between us, her fingers tightening on the cup she grasped. “As a lawyer, I’m sure you agree with me.”

“If there was any proof of other victims, then I would.” Her blue eyes drilled into me. “I am, as you say, a lawyer, Detective. I need evidence for any case to exist.”

“So, it’s a stalemate then?” My discouragement was easy to hear in my voice.

“Yes.” She nodded. “We both have good points, and I see no obvious compromise.”

“What next then?” I asked, draining my cup.

Motioning to the teapot, she smiled. “How about another cup?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kade

The dull ache in my head stirred me, compelling my eyes to open and face reality, but as I blinked around the well-lit hall, I wasn't clear what I was looking at.

“Where the fuck am I?” I murmured, or perhaps more importantly, why was I on the floor?

Rising to an upright position, I groaned at my head's disapproval. Apparently, it would prefer I stay sprawled out in the corridor, but that wasn't going to happen. I had to find out what transpired and ensure Tiffany was okay. If anything had happened to her, I'd—

An image of Tiffany strapped to the bench in her playroom filled my mind, curling my lips as relief spread through me. At least Tiffany was fine—more than fine, actually. Whatever else happened could be dealt with.

Shoving away the throw that had been laid out over me, my brow creased. Why was I covered up, and who, except my little girl, would care enough to even bother? If only I could remember... Using the wall for support, I climbed to my feet and glanced around trying to get my bearings.

I'd come looking for something—something important. It must have been significant to have drawn me away from Tiffany's scintillating submission, so what was it?

The Detective.

The answer detonated in my mind like a hammer to a landmine. Of course, how could I have forgotten? The lovely Detective Lucas had visited and brought with her a whole host of problems. She was the reason I'd come back. I'd intended to kill her, but something had gone wrong. Pulse quickening, I

recalled the agonizing pain of the taser she'd shot me with and how I'd fallen to the ground, unable to defend myself.

"Bitch!" I muttered into my chest. It wasn't the first time she'd caused me harm, but it would be the last. My original mission still stood. The detective needed to be erased.

Pulling in a breath, I considered my options. I had no idea where Lucas had gone, but I did know that my little girl was still strapped in the monochrome room at the mercy of the vibrator. It was a bloody alluring thought, but I had to be reasonable. I didn't know how long I'd been out for the count. She could be unconscious herself at this point. Determined to do the right thing for once, I stumbled toward the playroom, trying to compose myself. The clanging headache persuaded me that Lucas had whacked me with something heavy. She could be miles away by now. It wasn't a reassuring idea. My plan to dispose of her had backfired, and I'd have to manage the consequences.

I was halfway up the next corridor when the sound of voices reached my ears. Two female voices. Halting, I strained to hear more, aware that one of them belonged to Tiffany.

Oh God.

Loathing the dread that rose at the notion of Tiffany being in trouble, I pushed my fear away, but my resolve couldn't alter the facts. If Lucas had found her and taken her from the playroom, she could do anything to her. Lucas was armed, and my gun was missing. Inching closer to the kitchen where the conversation seemed to be coming from, I held my breath, listening more closely.

"Are you planning to leave?"

That was my little girl's voice, and she didn't sound as if she was under duress—God knew I'd heard the sweet resonance often enough to know.

"On walking away from us and not looking back? Or..."
There was a pause where I couldn't pull in another breath.

“Are you planning on taking whatever you think you’ve learned back to your superiors?”

Wow, that was a bold question, but then why was I shocked? Tiffany was an excellent lawyer. I had witnessed her in action myself.

“I can’t just sit on what I know, Tiffany.” Lucas’s voice was full of disdain. “Can’t ignore what I know to be true.”

“And what’s that?” Tiffany asked. “We’ve already established that you have no evidence against him.”

My ears pricked up at the use of the pronoun. My ego would have preferred that she refer to me as her master, but I discarded the irrelevant thought. What mattered was her safety—both of our safety. My ego would have to wait.

“I have the fact that he bound and drugged me.” Lucas’ voice was impassioned.

“And the fact that you entered his property without permission.” Tiffany sounded wonderfully calm, every inch the professional I’d seen in court. “And your recent assault of him.”

“*He* had a gun!” Lucas hissed, obviously prepared to paint me as the villain to suit herself.

Naturally, I was under no illusions about who I was, but then this time, I wasn’t the one who’d broken into someone else’s house.

“He pulled the gun on you?” Tiffany’s tone was thoughtful, the lengthy pause that followed tightening the knot of apprehension in my stomach.

Edging closer to the kitchen, I waited for Lucas’ response, the pain in my head burgeoning until I wanted to throw up.

“No,” she admitted eventually. “It was on his person when he came looking for me.”

Blowing out a breath, I rested the back of my head against the wall as the discussion continued.

“You can see my point then? The best you have, Detective, is an impasse—your word against his and not much else.”

A trace of righteousness echoed in Tiffany’s voice. Normally, I’d have spanked it out of her, but I’d never been more pleased to hear it.

“What about your word?” Lucas droned on. “You know the things he’s done... what he’s capable of?”

The nervous energy inside me knotted tighter. My little girl knew all those things, but as far as I knew, Lucas knew none of them—aside from the alleged crimes committed at Pennsylvania Avenue.

“I’m in love with him.”

I couldn’t help but smile at Tiffany’s confession.

“I’ve never pressed charges and you’ll never convince me to speak for the prosecution.”

“I know.” Lucas sounded pleasingly despondent. “But I hope you can see my point as well? The man you’re entangled with is trouble, Miss Noble. I’d be willing to wager my pension that you’re not the first woman he’s stalked and attacked. Somewhere out there are other victims and they deserve justice.”

Gripping the wall for support, I crept closer until I was only around the corner from the entrance to the room.

“As a lawyer, I’m sure you agree with me.”

“If there was any proof of other victims, then I would.”

Peering around the corner, I watched the moment Tiffany lied for me. She knew better than anyone what I was guilty of, but true to her word, she didn’t give me away. I’d never loved her more than at that moment.

“I am, as you say, a lawyer, Detective. I need evidence for any case to exist.”

“So, it’s a stalemate then?” Lucas’s head fell at the realization.

Watching her, my gaze flitted to my gun, left on the edge of the counter.

“Yes.” Tiffany nodded, her back to me. “We both have good points, and I see no obvious compromise.”

“What next then?” Lucas sighed, finishing whatever she was drinking from my father’s finest china.

Tiffany gestured to the teapot. “How about another cup?”

“How about not?” I hadn’t planned to speak, but in typical Kade tradition, I acted on impulse, advancing into the room with my eyes set on the prize of my loaded weapon.

“Master!” Spinning in her seat, Tiffany beamed at me. “You’re okay!”

“Little girl.” I flashed a grin at her, headed for my gun. “You can tell me later how you got away, but first—”

“But first, nothing.” Lurching for the weapon, Lucas grabbed it, fumbling with the trigger as I reached her.

“No!” Tiffany’s shrill scream pierced the air as I grabbed the barrel, directing it away from us both. “Get off him!”

“Tiffany,” I urged through gritted teeth as I wrestled the detective for the gun. My little girl had already left her stool and was loitering dangerously close to the action. “Stay out of the way.”

It wasn’t that I couldn’t handle the intruder, but I was wary of the loaded gun, knowing it wouldn’t take much pressure for her finger to unload bullets around my kitchen. Pushing Lucas to the ground, I climbed over her, trying to neutralize the threat.

“It’s time this was over,” Lucas screeched as I held her wrist down and tried to push the gun away.

“Oh, I agree completely.” With one final effort, I held her wrist down, sending the gun whizzing past her feet. “It’s time

you were put to bed.”

“You bastard!” Lucas yelled, fighting me every inch of the way.

Attempting to manage her flailing limbs, I realized how hard she must have hit me. It wasn't usually this difficult to pin down my prey. As though she could read my pounding head, she lurched, sending one knee straight to my groin. Pain erupted at the attack, sending me falling to one side in a futile effort to protect my poor testicles.

“Fuck!” I hissed, eyes closing as the hurt engulfed me, but the sound of Lucas' snarl soon drew my attention again.

“If I can't shoot you, then let's try this.”

Eyes widening, I saw her lunge at me with one of the kitchen knives. I never saw her grab it, but long and menacing looking, the blade approached faster than I'd have liked. It gave me little time to think, let alone get away. Braced for the new injury, I held my breath, but my heart stopped beating altogether as the deafening noise of a gunshot rang out around me.

The bullet flew over my head, hitting Lucas in the chest and sending her flying back toward the glass doors. Stunned at what had just happened, I pulled myself upright, hardly believing my eyes. Standing over me was the woman I'd captured, the woman who'd tamed me—the one who'd changed everything—a steely look in her eyes and my gun in her hand.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tiffany

All I saw at that moment was the end. The end of everything I knew, everything I'd fought for. Something snapped in my mind as I watched Lucas diving at Kade with the knife. Something that resolved I would act.

I'd never been a violent woman, nor especially interested in self-defense, although God knew after Kade I had thought about it, but this was different. This was a woman who had no right to even be there, lunging at my lover with an eight-inch blade. Lurching for the gun, I operated out of instinct. Neither of them was looking my way. A deranged gleam danced in Lucas' eyes and understandably, my master was preoccupied with her looming attack. Neither of them witnessed me collect the weapon nor take aim. Neither of them noticed my finger as it hugged the trigger.

I didn't think as I stepped forward, pointing the gun at her chest. All I knew was that I had to stop her, and there wasn't time to dither. A few seconds would cost Kade his life, and that outcome was simply unacceptable. I hadn't given up everything and committed myself to him to watch him slip away in a pool of his own blood. A wave of cold triumph washed over me as I fired, noise splintering the air as the bullet smashed into her body and threw her to the tiles.

Kade's head rose, his eyes wide as he surveyed me. "Little girl?"

He looked as if he'd seen a ghost, or to be more specific, as though he couldn't believe it was really me, but as I stood there, I couldn't understand why. This story was infinite, as old as time itself. What could have been simpler than a woman determined to protect her man? I hadn't instigated the violence, but I would finish it.

From behind him, Lucas groaned, her limbs writhing as she grappled with the pain. Walking around my master, I looked down at her face, her expression agonized and every bit as shocked as Kade's. The blade she'd been so frantic to push into my man was strewn a few feet away.

"I'm sorry, Detective." My voice was oddly monotonic. "You should have run for your life."

As it turned out, Kade had been right all along. It was time to close this chapter. Pointing the gun to her temple, I squeezed the trigger. A raw numbness spread over me as I took in the outcome of my choice, my thoughts flitting to how much work it would be to clean up the kitchen.

"Tiffany." Scrambling to his feet, Kade yanked me backward, wrangling the weapon from me and switching on the safety. "Are you okay?"

From some distant place, I thought I heard the roll of thunder, but there was no sign of the threatening storm. Perhaps it was only happening in my head?

"Tiffany." Shaking me gently, he roused me from my thoughts, spinning me to look at him.

"Master." All there was in the world was his face, the soft hair at his jaw, and those mesmerizing silver-gray eyes. I could never have given him up, never have let Lucas take him away. "Are you okay?"

"You saved me." He shook his head in disbelief, though his lips curled. "You fucking saved me!"

"Of course." What did he think I was going to do? Watch him get sliced?

"Thank you." Discarding the gun onto the counter, he pulled me into his embrace, holding me against his chest. "Thank you, little girl."

I don't know how long we stood there in the dimly lit kitchen. The usual markers of time were lost to the black hole that had opened in my world, but at some point, tears came.

“Hey.” He soothed, stroking the back of my head. “It’s okay. Don’t worry. I’m here.”

He was there. Thank God, but one glance over his shoulder confirmed the lifeless body of Lucas was there, too, and I had done that. I was a murderer.

“Oh God.” My knees buckled as I fought for breath. “What have I done?”

Catching me in his arms, he tugged me closer. “You’re in shock,” he counseled. “It will pass.”

“And then what?” I gasped, covering my mouth as a sudden surge of nausea threatened to make an appearance. “How can I live with this, Master?”

“Shhh.” Sweeping me from my feet, he carried me from the room. With no other choice, I buried my face in his shirt and sobbed.

What had happened to me? I was a good woman, a moral person. That’s why I hadn’t taken the trappings of legal defense and had opted to prosecute for the state. I wanted to do the right thing, to put the bad guys behind bars, but I’d never conceived a future where I might be one of them.

Head spinning, I closed my eyes as he transported me across the house. By the time I opened them again, the soft hues of the master bedroom surrounded me.

“Rest.” Tugging the cardigan from my weary body, he pulled the covers over my body and lowered to his haunches, worried gray eyes meeting mine.

Rest? Was he mad? How could I rest? I’d just shot a woman—a police officer! I had to hand myself in, had to think about what I’d tell the authorities.

“Master,” I croaked, reaching for him.

“I’ll take care of you, little girl,” he promised. “Protect you. The way you’ve protected me.”

“I shot her.” Disgust echoed in my voice.

“Not just that,” he reasoned, taking my hand. “You protected me before then, Tiffany.” Edging closer, he lifted my knuckles to his lips and brushed his mouth over my skin. “When you refused to press charges against me for the things I’d done.” Pausing, his eyes met mine. “And when you listened to my confession and didn’t tell anyone about it. You are the most beautiful star in the world, and you’ve constantly protected me. Now it’s my time to keep you safe.”

“What’s going to happen, Master?” I squeaked, repulsed by my own self-pity.

I was a killer. I should get what I deserved, but then I knew well enough that plenty of predators walked the streets. Some slipped through the net of a trial by their peers, while others, like Kade, never even saw the inside of a courtroom. The world was far from a fair and just place, but that was no justification for what I’d done.

“Maybe I can make a case for manslaughter. After all,” I went on, “she was about to stab you, and I couldn’t just stand there and let that happen.”

“There’ll never be a case to be heard.” His knowing tone knotted the ball of repulsion in my belly.

“There has to be,” I whispered. “I can’t get away with this.”

“You already have,” he assured me. “The detective was never here, and any evidence to the contrary will soon be erased, deleted, and wiped away.”

“But it’s not right, Master.” The prospect of being sick was all the more tangible, thanks to the throbbing in my head. “I still did it, and someone will miss her.”

“Yes,” he agreed, squeezing my palm. “And that’s tragic for them.” Hesitating, his free hand rose to my face and drew away the loose strands of my hair. “But once her body is burned, the C.C.T.V erased, and her phone dealt with, there’s nothing tying her to Barrington House.”

“She must have driven here.” Sitting bolt upright in bed, a fresh surge of panic enveloped me. “You said she was in a blue car earlier. How else could she have got here?”

I hated myself for the fear in my voice. The tremble was only for me, the concern I harbored for saving my own sorry skin. It had nothing to do with the woman lying dead in the kitchen. At that moment, I realized I’d become more than a murderer. I had morphed into something worse—a coward.

“I’ll find the car and get rid of it.”

“B-But if the police find an abandoned car with your DNA all over it, they’ll be able to trace it back to us, Master, and—”

“Hey.” Pressing one fingertip softly to my lips, he silenced me. “Relax, little girl. You forget, I have some expertise in this field.” His lips twitched, though I failed to see the humor. “I know how to deal with this.”

“You do?” I mumbled around his digit.

“Yes,” he confirmed, leaning closer and replacing his finger with his lips. Skimming over mine, they offered the most sensual solace—more than a killer like me merited. “I will deal with it, and you will stay here and be saved.”

Saved? That was an interesting way of dealing with the woman who’d just shot someone dead.

“But I just killed her...” Brows knitting, I almost choked on the words.

“You just rescued me,” he corrected. “From the woman who wanted me dead. You, little girl, are my savior.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kade

Time protracted as I waited with her, minutes morphing into the small hours of the morning until she finally stopped fretting and allowed sleep to take her. I understood her wretchedness better than most, though I could barely recall who my first kill had been, let alone how I'd reacted. No doubt I was less remorseful than my little girl, but then that was the difference between us.

I had always seen her compassion as a weakness, but kissing her cheek and whispering goodbye, I accepted I'd been wrong. She was special *because* of her lingering respect for humanity and in only a few months together, I'd managed to help her rip right through it. The thought consumed me as I started work, but I couldn't allow myself to dwell. There was a lot to do.

The human body contained a surprising amount of blood, particularly when pints of it were spilled across your kitchen tiles. It took a long time for the blood-splattered room to resemble normality, but I worked studiously, keeping my little girl in mind whenever I tired. Collecting the soaked rags into black trash bags, I glanced around the space. There was still the matter of Lucas' body to deal with and the kitchen would need another scrub down before I'd be completely satisfied. Even then, if forensics turned up at my door, they'd be able to discover the traces of blood still present, but it didn't perturb me. Forensics wasn't going to show up. I would make damn sure of it.

Grabbing a cup of coffee, I stripped out of my clothes and discarded them with Tiffany's cardigan and the other rubbish. Dressing in joggers and a sweatshirt, I leaned against the counter and took a moment to watch the sunrise, reveling in

the beauty of the simple act. It was so easy to take things like nature's wonder for granted, to always assume the sun would rise and you'd see another day, but the night's proceedings had clarified the assumption.

Only my little girl's quick thinking and fortitude had saved me from a potentially fatal knife wound. I could easily have been the one bleeding to death. I'd been moments from finding myself the latest spirit to haunt Barrington.

I'd loved Tiffany before last night, adored her with my body and mind, but draining my coffee, I was struck by the sense of a new awakening. She was no longer my captive, no longer only my submissive or the woman I worshipped—her actions had elevated her to some unforeseen higher status. Placing the cup beside the teacups she and Lucas drank from, I finally understood the difference.

Tiffany had killed for me. She'd leapt over the line to save me, knowing full well what the fallout would be. A woman like her wasn't designed to slaughter. It wasn't in her genetic make-up, but she was so used to pushing beyond her comfort zone for me, she hadn't thought twice. She'd acted and condemned herself. There were no words for the sacrifice she'd made, nothing I could do to make it up to her, but loading the cups into the dishwasher, I knew I'd spend the rest of my life trying to.

Surrendering her body to me had made her mine, but eliminating Lucas had achieved something far more fundamental. Now I was hers—my soul belonged to her in a tangible way. I'd never believed in the idea of soul mates, but every fiber of me told me that's what Tiffany was—the essence of everything I sought in life. A woman who'd submit sexually, but who, when push came to shove, would always have my back. I'd thought it many times before, but staring out the window, there was no doubt—I was the luckiest guy in the world.

Emboldened by caffeine and the incredible woman I'd found, I headed out into the early morning light, opening old

Noel's shed and scanning the enormous array of gardening apparatus on offer. Choosing a well-used spade and a tin of kerosene, I headed out onto the grounds to select the perfect site. A pair of sparrows chased me as I walked, dancing around each other as if they were trying to reveal the right location. Scanning the open space, I smiled, thankful to have inherited the gigantic property. My father had been a swine, but he'd bequeathed his only son a huge and isolated estate. Nobody ever came out here, and nobody would ever find Lucas. The Barrington estate was perfect.

Taking the sparrow's advice, I set to work, digging out a shallow grave. I didn't intend to bury Lucas—evidence was always less likely to survive flames than the earth—but the impromptu hole would conceal the ashes of whatever remained of her. I worked faster than I thought, completing the task within the hour. Striding back to the house, I checked Lucas' pockets. Retrieving her car keys, I slid them into my joggers with my phone, which I'd found with her body. Placing her device on the counter, with a vow to check its secrets later, I collected her corpse and took it to her final resting place. It was true that it wasn't the most dignified end, but then I wasn't well known for my attention to dignity. Throwing her body into the hole, I returned to the kitchen, grabbed a box of matches, and carried out the bags. I emptied the contents into the open space before pouring the fuel over the grave.

Pulling in a deep breath, I lit a match and threw it onto the site before retreating to a safe distance. I had no inclination to watch it burn but wanted to make sure the blaze was safe before I headed inside to shower. Devouring the kerosene, the flames rose high into the air like a ritualistic bonfire before settling down to their purpose. It would take a while to complete the cremation, but it didn't matter. The smoke and odor would bother no one but us. I'd already left a message for Noel and his team, advising them that Tiffany had a virus, and they should steer clear for a day or two.

By the time anyone returned to Barrington, the ashes of whatever remained of Detective Lucas would be buried in the earth.

Tiffany

Sleep was no friend to me, but how could I complain? I was a murderer, as bad as the man I'd fallen in love with. Staring at the ceiling, the thought haunted me. How could I go on? How could I continue to practice law, knowing what I'd done? I'd made a great many mistakes in my life, but none of them compared to this. There was no coming back, and if Kade had been right about my getting away with the crime, then I faced a long and uncertain future wrangling with the dilemma.

"But what else can I do?" I whispered, lifting my hand to my head. It was full of woe, having wrestled with my misplaced morality since he'd carried me to bed. "There are no answers."

I had killed Lucas, and whatever happened I had to live with that knowledge.

Kade had left hours ago, disappeared, I assumed to take care of the mess I'd left. My belly lurched at the hideous thought, knotting with my anxiety, but deep down, I knew I'd never have the strength to do what needed to be done. Only a man like Kade could handle the situation.

"But I'm just like him," I reminded myself. "I should go to prison for what I've done."

We both should.

"But if we do that, they'll never let us be together." The pounding in my head intensified. "Everything we've been

through will have been for nothing.”

A low sob caught in my throat, producing more tears, but I discarded them with the heel of my hand. The emotion wasn't born of sympathy or remorse. It was only filled with the regret I felt for myself and for the man I loved. Even now, I couldn't find a single tear for the woman I'd shot. Everything was about Kade.

Yanking the cover from the bed, I pulled it over my shoulders and wandered to the window. What the hell had happened to me? Not so long ago, everything had been clear—my future, my career path, my every hope and aspiration—but now, everything was cast into shadow. He had done that. Kade had crashed into my life and caused this devastation.

“That's not fair,” I insisted, pressing my palm into the windowpane. Consoled by the cool temperature, I moved nearer, leaning my forehead against the glass. “Kade is many things, but he didn't make me pull the trigger.” I had done that all by myself.

Losing myself to my misery, I broke down into long protracted sobs, steaming the window around me. Whether or not I was ever convicted of Lucas' death, I would still have to come to terms with what I'd done. No sentence would ever rid me of the burden of the guilt, which was what I deserved.

At length, the wave of emotion passed, and I could think clearly again. Walking to the en suite, I blew my nose. I'd made this choice. It was time I was mature enough to accept the consequences.

“I'll have to give up law,” I sniffed, moving back to the fogged glass. “I don't want to, but if I'm not going to face the law, I can't prosecute others.”

An odd solace resonated inside of me with the verdict, as if whatever remained of my soul was placated by the loss. My sacrifice could never make amends for what I'd done, but it was something—some small gesture of conciliation in the black hole that had once been my heart. Wiping the pane with

my palm, my gaze scanned the view of the Barrington estate. Eyes blinking at the light, my brows knitted. When had the sun come up? Wrapping the bed cover tighter around me, I looked closer, my attention drawn to the pillar of smoke that was being blown into view from one side.

“Fire.”

The word resounded in my head, its meaning obvious. There was only one reason Kade would have started a fire, and although I couldn't say it aloud, the thought sent a chill racing along my spine.

“Oh God.”

Discarding the cover, I ran to the closet and yanked out the long fluffy robe he'd bought me. Pulling it on, I flew down the stairs, sliding my feet into my waiting wellington boots before I ran toward the back of the house. I stopped dead in the entrance to the kitchen, the unease in my tummy peaking.

This was where it had happened. This was where my actions had altered the course of my entire life. Inching forward, my focus flitted around for any trace of my crime, but to my bewilderment, the place was spotless. Not only was Lucas' body gone, but there was no sign that anything untoward had happened.

Heart racing, I dashed across the floor to the glass doors and ran out into the gardens. Whatever he did to the place, I wasn't sure that I'd ever feel comfortable there again. Kade had talked about the ghosts of his past roaming the halls, and now I had one of my own—a detective called Lucas whose curiosity had cost her life.

Doubling over at the thought, I fell to my knees on the grass. Who was I trying to kid? No superficial concession like career loss was going to make this better. I'd killed someone for fuck's sake, and whatever Kade said, that had consequences. Heaving in a breath, I inhaled the foul smell of the impromptu cremation and vomited, the contents of my

stomach lining the neatly mowed lawn. Covering my mouth, I hung my head and tried not to breathe.

This can't be happening. This can't be happening.

Lifting my face to the sky, I let out a huge, guttural scream.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kade

I hadn't intended to stay, but the dancing flames lured me, making it difficult to walk away. Sure, I smelled the odor as Lucas' body was destroyed, but it didn't bother me. I had seen, smelt, and done worse and would do so again if it meant keeping Tiffany safe.

That was the thought that buoyed me as I stood witness to Lucas' last moments. That was what I was thinking when the shrill scream pierced the air.

"Little girl?"

I knew it was her immediately, not only because there was no one else it could have been, but because every muscle of my body told me so. Spinning, I saw her a few feet from the house, crumpled to her knees. Normally, there was nowhere better for my little girl to have been, but everything about this scene was wrong, from the robe she was wearing to the anguished expression she wore on her reddened face.

"Tiffany!"

My long strides closed the distance between us in a heartbeat, but she didn't open her eyes at my approach.

"Tiffany, what's wrong?"

Stopping short of her vomit, I concluded the answer for myself. She was ill, probably a result of the fumes. That was why I hadn't involved her in the process. She needed to rest while I took care of this. Walking to where she knelt, I thrust out my palm.

"Come on."

"I can't, Master." Still, she wouldn't look at me, but the tears that fell and her puffy eyelids conveyed how she'd spent

the last couple of hours.

“I’m not asking.” My tone hardened. “Take my hand now, or I’ll make you move.”

One trembling hand rose, feeling for mine, and cutting her a little slack, I grasped it and yanked her to her feet.

“This way.”

Steering her back to the kitchen, I shook my head at the state of her. The new robe I’d bought for her was covered in dirt and she needed a shower after her recent bout of sickness. But that was okay. I needed to clean up, too—we would wash the sorry incident away together.

“Inside,” I instructed when we reached the glass doors. “Take those boots off. I just cleaned up the place.”

Hobbling inside, she drew in what seemed like a painful breath as she complied. Barefoot in only her robe, she looked more forlorn than I’d ever seen her.

“Was that her b-body?” Her voice trembled as she stared through the glass at the fire.

“Yes,” I confirmed, closing the door and blocking out the noxious smell. “Take the robe off. We’re going to shower.”

“Master.” Bloodshot eyes met mine, but it was the pain flickering in them that disconcerted the most. “I can’t do this... can’t live with what I’ve become.”

“One step at a time, beautiful,” I replied, frantic not to let her unsettling stare throw me. “You don’t need to worry about that now. Let’s just get cleaned up.”

Easing the robe from her shoulders, I ignored the swell of arousal that stirred at her nakedness and scooped her into my arms. She gazed blankly into space as I carried her to the nearest bathroom and placed her gently on her feet. Closing the door, I turned up the heat and moved two towels to the heated rail before turning on the shower. Steam rose quickly into the air as I guided her into the cubicle.

“Get under the water, little girl.” I motioned for her to move, encouraging her under the current when she failed to do so. “You’ll feel better once you’ve showered.”

“How has this happened, Master?” Her haunted expression stared straight ahead, but I ignored it, moving behind her and easing shampoo into her tresses.

“We don’t need to talk about this now.”

“When then?” She turned, exhausted eyes meeting mine.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I answered, dismissing the fact that she hadn’t referred to me correctly. Tiffany was evidently still in shock. I needed to give her the time and space she needed.

“I’m ready now.” Swallowing, she turned to face me as I washed away the labor of the morning. “I’ve thought of nothing else, Master. I can’t live with myself.”

“Did you sleep?” I asked, beckoning her back under the torrent. “When I left you, I thought you were sleeping.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Not much. How can I?”

“Tiffany.” Her name was a sigh on my lips. I loathed to see her this way, so brow beaten by something completely out of her control. She wasn’t to know the madcap detective would break into my house, just like she could never have anticipated the events that had followed. Hell, Tiffany hadn’t even known I owned a gun until tonight. “None of this is your fault.”

“I pulled the trigger.” Her voice was monotone as I pulled her in for a hug. “I killed her.”

“You protected me,” I reminded her. “Otherwise, I’d be the dead body out there.” I hadn’t intended for the answer to sound quite so harsh, but the point was still valid.

“She didn’t have to die.” Relaxing against me, her face rested on my shoulder. “She shouldn’t have died.”

She was always going to die. Somehow, I managed to hold in the thought.

“Shhh,” I soothed. “It’s not your fault. As soon as Lucas stuck her nose into our business, she wrote the lines of her own ending. I was going to kill her remember, but she took me by surprise and tasered me.” I shuddered at the thought. “Then, once I was down, she struck me over the head with my own decanter. She could have killed me.”

“We were all wrong,” she whispered, “but only one of us is dead.”

“I know,” I replied, kissing her wet hair. “And it’s the right one.”

“Master!” Her horrified gaze rose to meet mine. “How can you say that?”

“Because it’s the truth,” I consoled. “We’ve found something special together. Something someone like Lucas could never understand, and we deserve our shot at happiness.”

“How can we after this?” Her brow creased.

“We’ll heal,” I assured her. “You forgave me for all the odious things I’ve done, little girl. With time, you’ll learn to forgive yourself.”

“I don’t know, Master.” She shook her head, mewling as my palm squeezed her backside.

“Well, I do,” My tone was emphatic. “So, until you’re sure, you’re going to take my word for it.” Lifting her chin, I waited until she recognized the surety in my voice. Tiffany had heard it many times before and understood what it meant. I would have my way, and she was coming along for the ride, whether or not she wanted to. “Do you understand, little girl?”

She nodded against my fingertip, although her eyes still begged to differ.

“Say it.”

“I understand, Master.” She sagged against me.

“Good.” Her acquiescence would do for the time being.
“Let’s finish up and get dry. We’ll get through this, but in the meantime, I want you to always remember something.”

“What’s that, Master?”

I couldn’t believe she had to ask.

“I love you,” I told her. “And because, by some miracle, you love me, too, I know all things are possible.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tiffany

I kept waiting for remorse to kick in, for regret to create spores in my soul and eat me up from the inside, but the truth was that it didn't happen. Yes, I was *regretful*, but only because of my past programming—the fact that I'd been taught it was wrong to kill and conditioned into thinking I should pay for my sins. That's what my parents had told me, what my peers had believed, and what a life of criminal law had constantly reinforced.

The truth, though, was Kade had started to break down that programming long before Lucas had crept into Barrington House. He'd started the day he confessed his crimes and helped me to process the aftermath. He'd shown me it was more than possible to do awful things and never be convicted for them, but more than that, it was possible to move on and be happy. I was a long way from happy, but his example meant that while still sickening and shocking, my actions were easier to reconcile than they should have been.

“How are you feeling now, little girl?” His soft voice stirred me from my morose thoughts.

“Okay, Master.” I wasn't okay. Or maybe my new realization meant that I was. I didn't know anymore.

“You haven't eaten your sandwich.”

Glancing down, I noticed he was right. “Yeah, I...” Sighing, I skimmed my fingers over the bread. “I'm not hungry.”

“You need to eat.” His tone was insistent.

“Master.” Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Lucas' pale face behind my lids. “Please, I feel sick.”

Gaze narrowing, his stare drilled into me. “Eat half of the sandwich.”

I could tell the compromising approach was killing him.

“You need energy, Tiffany.”

Scanning the wholegrain bread, my insides twisted. The sandwich looked appetizing enough, but despite my shower, I didn’t feel clean enough to eat. I wondered if I’d ever feel clean again.

“Okay.”

Collecting half of the sandwich, I forced the corner into my mouth before I bit down and chewed. Trying not to overthink the process, I went through the motions until I was able to swallow it. I lifted the bread back to mouth before the question burst into my head.

“Master?”

“Hmmm?” he asked, watching me in front of his empty plate. Kade’s appetite it seemed, was unaffected by last night’s trauma, but predictably, I was taking longer to process what had happened.

He’d already moved lunch from the kitchen diner to the formal dining room we rarely used, but still, the image of Lucas’ corpse taunted me.

“How do I stop thinking about her?”

“Time.” His answer was immediate. “There are no fast solutions, I’m afraid, but time will heal.”

Glancing past him to the huge grandfather clock in the center of the room, I wondered how much time it would take.

“I feel like I’m living someone else’s life.” Brow furrowing, my voice trembled, revealing how close I was to producing more tears. I’d no idea anyone could cry so much.

“My life, you mean?” His eyebrow arched in the way I usually found so tantalizing.

“No, that wasn’t what I meant, Master.” Was it? “I just can’t believe this is real, that it’s really happened, that I killed someone.”

Killed someone, killed someone.

The admission echoed around my head as if it was determined to taunt me.

“You saved me.” His hand reached for my wrist. “She was going to kill me, little girl.”

“I know, but—”

“So, you were my guardian angel.” Lips curling, his thumb stroked across my skin. “You protected me when I couldn’t protect myself.”

“You make it sound heroic, Master.” I turned away, repulsed by myself. “I’m no hero.”

“You’re *my* hero,” he countered, persuading my gaze to return to his handsome face. “I’ll be forever thankful.”

“I just feel so...” Hesitating, I tried to think of the right word.

“What?” he prompted.

“Dirty.” There, I’d said it. “And not in a good way, Master. It feels like the sort of stain I can never clean away.”

“Very Lady Macbeth.” He chuckled, the sound riling me.

“I mean it, Master. We can justify what I did however we like. The fact remains, someone is dead, and that’s not changing.”

“No.” He squeezed my hand. “That’s right. It’s not. She’s dead.”

Silence thickened the air around us as his statement lingered.

“She’s dead, and she’s not coming back, but we’re still alive, little girl. You and I have a whole life to live together.”

“Do you think it’s this place?” Peering around the wood-paneled room, I shivered.

“What do you mean?”

“Barrington?” I pulled in a breath. “You once said it was haunted, that you saw the ghosts of your past in the corners of the rooms. Do you think the place pollutes somehow, gets under your skin until we all become carbon copies of your father?”

“You don’t know anything about my father.” His voice hardened.

“That’s because you don’t tell me anything, Master. Whatever he did to you is just another secret this house is bound to keep.”

“Tiffany.” His tone was a warning. “Don’t do this.”

“Do what?” A spike of anger rose in me. “Speak the truth?”

“Don’t lash out at me because you’re upset.” He fixed me with one of those stares that would normally have melted my core, but today, passion had been replaced by a new nefarious vacuum. “All it will achieve is a sore bottom.”

Of course, spanking was Kade’s answer to practically everything.

“Tell me then, Master.” I wasn’t going to drop it. He’d been dangling inferences about his father for longer than I could recall, and it was time I knew what had gone on in the dark recesses of the house.

“Tell me what happened with your father—what did he do to you?”

“Tiffany.” He hissed my name through gritted teeth as if my questions had wounded him.

If that was the case, then so be it. According to Kade, I’d saved his life in the last twenty-four hours. He owed me this much.

“I don’t want to talk about this now.”

“You never want to talk about it,” I snapped, realizing immediately how unfair that sounded. “Please, Master.” I reached for his hand with my free palm. “If you can open up about this a little, I think it might help me.”

Gray eyes penetrated me as he chewed on what I’d said, and for the longest time no words were exchanged. Then, just as the dread furling in my belly threatened to explode into more emotion, his lips twitched into life.

“I’ve never told anyone this.” His tone was somber, tensing my muscles.

“I know,” I soothed. “I really appreciate it, Master.”

“You deserve it,” he corrected me. “That’s the only reason I’m telling you.”

Nodding, I gripped his hand as our gazes locked.

“He used to wait until night fell.” His voice wavered as he closed his eyes, revisiting the scarring experiences.

“What did he do, Master?” The ominous feeling in the pit of my stomach told me that I already knew the answer, but having pushed him, it seemed important to wait and let him tell me in his own words.

“He’d come to my room.” Kade exhaled as though each new breath was willing him on. “He’d touch me.” His jaw tightened. “Make me do things to myself and in the end, he...” Gripping my hand, his fingers tightened. “He forced himself onto me.”

“Oh God, Master.” Pain exploded in my head as I tried to rationalize the terror he must have experienced as a small child. “I’m so sorry those things happened to you.”

It explained a hell of a lot. Like why Kade had shut down from society, why he’d ostracized himself from his father, and ultimately, why he’d replicated similar terrible deeds with women later in his life.

“How did you get away from him?”

“I didn’t.” Hurt reverberated in his voice, an echo of too many years of pain and exploitation. “I left home as young as I could and never came back until after you’d walked out on me in Hyde Park.”

My brow furrowed at the possibility that I’d forced him to relive his trauma not once, but twice. Without asking his permission, I left the table and wrapped my arms around him.

“Little girl.” He chuckled, despite the obvious pain resounding inside. “What are you doing?”

“Hugging you.” Breathing in his irresistible aroma, I gripped him tighter. “Letting you know you’re loved and that I’ll never share your secrets with another living soul.”

“I know.” His hand rose to the back of my head. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I pushed you to talk, Master.” Withdrawing a few inches, I kissed his jaw. “That was wrong of me.”

“I should have told you before,” he replied. “At least now you know how damaged I am and why I’m so fucked up. I hate to pass the buck, but it’s all down to my dear old dad.”

“He’s dead now?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I have the death certificate to prove it and sent his ashes to be scattered at sea—far away from me.”

“He had no right to do those things to you, Master. I hope you know that.”

“I know.” His tone was resolved as his brow rose. “Just like I had no right to do them to anyone else. The irony isn’t lost on me, little girl.”

“Yeah, well...” Pressing my head to his chest, I listened to his heartbeat as I considered his words. “It sounds as if we both need to work on letting go of the past to enjoy the future.”

“Yeah.” Blowing out a breath, his fingers stroked the back of my hair. “It seems so.”

Sitting in silence, I tried not to dwell on his confession, but it was all too easy to imagine the fear and shame of that small boy. Kade’s father had enveloped this house in a shroud of darkness, and all these years later, I had perpetuated it. Pressing a kiss against his shirt, one thing was certain in my mind.

If we were to have any shot at a happy future at Barrington, it was time the bright light of love was shone into every inch of the house.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kade

“These were her keys.”

Gesturing to the set of car keys on the counter, I turned back to Tiffany. It had been a couple of hours since we’d talked, and even though I’d felt pressurized into the admission, I had to admit the atmosphere was lighter since I’d said the words out loud. My father had done terrible things and none of them were my fault. There was catharsis in the confession, as if a heavy burden had finally fallen away.

“I’ve checked her phone, and it was set to a private network.”

“Like yours?” she asked.

“Exactly,” I replied. “Lucas didn’t want to be tracked. My C.C.T.V shows where she left her car. I’ll head down there and drive it to the other side of town.”

“Then what, Master?” she pressed with characteristic curiosity. “Someone will notice an abandoned car, and eventually, the police will check the registration and trace it back to Lucas.”

“I’ll drive with gloves and a mask,” I assured her. “And make sure I avoid the local closed-circuit television cameras. There’ll be no trace of me in the car when they find it, which means there are no routes back to Barrington.”

“It still sounds risky,” she grumbled. “If you have C.C.T.V. here, who’s to say there isn’t more around the town which proves that she came this way?”

“I am,” I told her. “I’ve hacked into every camera on the network and there are none in this vicinity. Barrington’s in the middle of nowhere, remember?”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I remember, Master.”

“It will be fine,” I soothed, running my fingers through her hair. “I’ve thought of everything.” I always did. “Once the car is gone, so is the last link to yesterday’s sorry episode. We can start to put it behind us.”

“And the g-grave...?”

She glanced warily out of the window as though she expected to see the ethereal sight of Lucas on the grounds. I had news for Tiffany—the only ghosts who haunted this place belonged to me, and I felt closer to exorcising them than I ever had before.

“Will be dealt with,” I replied. “Once the smoldering has stopped, I’ll dig over the earth and make sure any fragments and ashes are ground into the dirt. No one will ever find what they’re not looking for.”

Her brow furrowed, suggesting she wanted to argue, but mercifully, she didn’t. I was prepared to tip her over my lap and remind her what happened to little girls who questioned me, but I suspected we’d both benefit from dodging the conflict. The last twenty hours had been emotionally challenging and what we needed more now than anything was peace of mind, intimacy and closeness. Although I never expected to hear myself think it, punishment could wait for another day. The best thing about what we’d found together was there would always be another day.

“Come here,” I purred, waiting as she turned in my arms and pressed herself against me. “You’re safe, you know that, right?”

“Yes,” she squeaked. “Not that I deserve to be.”

“You deserve the world.” Kissing her crown, I went on, wanting her to know that after everything she’d done, she would always have me. “I don’t want you to beat yourself up about what happened. You dealt with a dangerous intruder. That’s all.”

“But I didn’t call the authorities, Master,” she said, lifting her gaze to look at me. “I didn’t report what had happened.”

“There was no need,” I reminded her. “Between us, we managed it.”

“But that’s not how it works in the real world.” She shook her head sadly. “Out there we’re all accountable for what we do, and it’s n—”

“But you’re not out there,” I interrupted, pinioning her with the intensity of my stare. “This isn’t the *real world*, it’s ours. Lucas came into our home, tried to hurt me, and she paid the price. End of discussion.”

“You make it sound simple, Master.” Her brows knitted. “You always do.”

“I just don’t overcomplicate things the way you like to.” Smiling, I ran my finger along her blushing cheek.

“I’ll have to give up work.” She almost choked on the words. “I’ll let Julia know on Monday.”

“What?” I gasped. “Why? You just started your new role.”

“I can’t work for the prosecution, knowing what I’ve done.” Her eyes widened to reinforce her point. “You can see the sheer hypocrisy of that, can’t you?”

“Listen.” My hand shifted to her hair, fisting her mane firmly. “You are damn good at your job, little girl.”

“I know,” she started. “But—”

“But nothing. You love what you do, and it took us weeks to negotiate a routine we were both happy with. I’m not going to let you throw that away because of the misplaced guilt you feel about Lucas.”

“It’s hardly misplaced, Master,” she complained. “The woman’s dead, and I killed her. Someone should pay for that. *I* should pay!”

“If you need to pay, then *I’ll* be the one delivering the penance.” Arching my brow at her, I watched as she registered

my inference, the gorgeous blush on her cheeks deepening.

“Master.” Catching her lower lip between her white teeth, she tried to shake her head, but my fist held her in place. “Not everything is about sex.”

“It can be.” Chuckling, I brushed my mouth over hers. “If I say it is.”

Gaze lowering, she pulled in a deep breath.

“All I’m saying is, if you have a nagging need for penitence, I can help you with that, little girl. I’m much more thorough than the authorities.”

“Yes, Master.” Her attention flitted back to my face. “I know.”

“Exactly.” Grinning, I lowered my face to her neck and nuzzled her alluring soft skin. “We can work out a schedule where you pay for your sins. Perhaps a hard spanking before work? That means you’ll still be free to be punished for any misdemeanors at the end of the day as well.”

“I won’t be able to sit down at all at this rate,” she protested, although the gleam in her eyes told me she was only playing.

“And therein lies the penance,” I breathed. “Every time your ass aches, your conscience will be assuaged.”

“Master.” Laughing gently, she sighed. “I’m not sure even your punishments can make up for what I did.”

“You, of all people, should know not to doubt my punishments.”

Leaning closer, I pressed my mouth to hers, claiming the kiss I had craved for so long. Arousal swelled as our bodies melded, my desire awakening after all the recent disturbance.

“I don’t doubt you, Master,” she replied breathlessly. “Only my ability to forgive myself.”

“We shall both work on forgiveness,” I promised, turning her against the counter and hoisting her onto the hard surface.

“In time, we’ll reconcile the things we’ve done.”

“I hope so.” Large blue eyes met mine, her legs parting around me as I pulled her flush against me.

“I know so.” Heat contracted in my core, urging me to rip her baggy shirt away and devour her again. “Have I told you how much I fucking love you?”

“Yes, Master.” Tiffany’s lips curled. “Once upon a time, I thought the worst thing that could happen would be to end up alone, but I realized that I was wrong.”

“I don’t know,” I murmured, helping myself to more of her delectable lips. I had thought to behave myself today, to give her some time to recover before I took what was mine, but she was making it increasingly hard. “You ending up alone doesn’t sound good to me.”

“That’s the point.” Chuckling, she sighed contentedly as I pressed hot kisses on her collarbone. “I’ve learned that the worst thing would be to end up with someone who made me feel alone, but that’s not you, Master.”

“No, little girl,” I agreed between caresses. “I’ll never make you feel that way.” It was finally an oath I could commit to with ease.

“And from where I’m sitting,” she continued. “That makes me the luckiest woman alive.”

“You are so fucking perfect,” I praised as her head turned to meet my demanding kisses. “So perfect for me.”

“I don’t know what this visceral thing is that we’ve created together, Master,” she gasped. “But I’m addicted. Wrap me up in it, please. Smother me in your darkness.”

“I’d love to.” Fuck, I couldn’t wait to devour her. “First, get out of that shirt, then lean back on the counter and spread your legs. Your master wants a snack before the main course.”

“Yes, Master,” she purred, shrugging the linen from her shoulders and revealing her beautiful body.

Stripping out of my top, I reveled in the look of her as she splayed before me—a vision of everything I yearned for. For so many years, I'd believed there were no happy endings, nothing worth having or fighting for, but I'd been wrong on all counts. Tiffany was as close to a happy ending as a monster like me could dare to dream about. She'd captured me with her complicated needs and unnecessary ethics and cemented my devotion with her incredible sacrifices. I would never walk away from a love as fulfilling as this and vowed to spend the rest of my life showing her why—starting with her inviting and delicious cunt.

The End.

Epilogue

Kade

Rolling to my side, my gaze slowly opened. Dim morning light bled into the bedroom, rousing me until instinctively, I reached for my little girl. My palm scanned the cold bedding, and my pulse quickened when I realized she wasn't there.

“Tiffany?”

Murmuring her name, I glanced around the room. It was empty, quiet, and peaceful. Everything looked normal, except for the small crack where the door sat ajar and the pale peach light of the bathroom.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I padded around the bed to the door and pulled it open.

“There you are.”

Standing by the basin with her back to me stood by my gorgeous little girl. Three months had passed since we'd dispatched the inquisitive detective, and during that time—with a little guidance and encouragement—the unease and shame had started to shift. I could never erase the incident, but I'd do whatever it took to lessen its sting.

“M-Master.” Peering at me, her brow creased. “I didn't mean to wake you.”

“What are you doing?” I asked, intrigued by her cagey behavior.

She'd seemed a little out of sorts for the last week, quieter than usual, and had received mail I knew nothing about until its arrival.

“Is everything okay?”

“I-I think so.” She hesitated, tripping over her words.

“You’re concerning me.” Folding my arms across my chest, I pulled in a deep breath. “Either tell me what’s bothering you right now or be prepared to tell me once you’re strewn over my thighs.”

It had been a couple of days since I’d spanked her, and the thought occurred that maybe that was all she needed—a sore bottom and the reassurance of my arms in the aftermath.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for days, Master.” Her breath was suddenly frantic, as if she was nervous about continuing, and she held one hand behind her back. “But I had to be sure.”

“Little girl.” Tapping my foot against the cool white tiles, I paused, mentally steeling myself to be patient. “I’m waiting.”

“I don’t know h-how you’ll feel.” Her voice wavered. “We haven’t talked about it, and…” It trailed away completely when she met my hard gaze. “Don’t be cross.”

“What’s happened?” I demanded, conscious of the anxiety twisting in my gut. We’d sworn to be open and transparent with each other. I didn’t like the fact that she was keeping things from me.

“This.” Tiffany moved her arm, revealing the white plastic strip she grasped in her fingers.

“What is it?” Though as I stepped forward, I already knew. I’d seen the tests before. In a few short seconds, the whole story unfolded, explaining her shift in mood and why she was a bundle of nerves.

“A pregnancy test?” My heart hammered as I glanced between the result and her wide eyes.

“Yes, Master.”

“It’s positive.” I said the words but only heard them as a distant echo.

“Yes.”

“You’re pregnant.”

It was as if I couldn't comprehend what was happening. I understood well enough and had always known that so much fucking without protection ran the risk of creating another life, but I'd never conceptualized this moment. Until now.

"Are you angry, Master?" The tremble in her voice snapped me from my stupor.

"What?" I asked, shaking my head. "Why would I be angry?"

"Because we never discussed it, and a baby will change everything..."

"We're having a baby!" An unexpected surge of emotion tore through me, swelling my heart and tearing my eyes as my lips curled.

"Yes, Master." Responding to my gesture, she smiled, reaching for my hands. "Are you happy?"

Was I? It took less than a second to answer.

"My God, yes!" I was having a hard time processing the wave of feeling, but one thing was for sure—I was ecstatic.

"You're sure?" She blinked at me, still uncertain. "I mean, how will we cope? I'll have to take a break from work, and we haven't been together that long."

"We'll cope," I assured her, knowing without a doubt that we would. "I'll be here, and we can hire more help around the house if need be. After all, money is no object."

"Thanks to your father."

She glanced around the room as though checking if he was truly gone, but the good news was that he was. I hadn't seen or heard from him or the small, frightened boy since before Lucas.

"His legacy is over." There was a strength in the statement. "And this..." Grasping her hand and the plastic test, I inhaled. "Is an opportunity to bury his ghost for good. We start over, and I do a better job than he did."

“You’re more of a man than he ever was.” Resolve echoed in her voice.

“You’re too kind,” I reminded her. “Especially given what you know about me.”

“I know you’d never hurt me or our baby.” Her free hand fell to her belly. “I know I love you with all my heart and soul. It’s time to fill Barrington with more light and love than it’s ever seen.”

“Good idea,” I murmured, closing what little distance remained between us as I swooped for a kiss. “You and this child are everything I’ll ever need.”

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