



He has designs on her.

FIXER

UPPER
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MINK



Fixer Upper

MINK

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CONTENTS

Fixer Upper

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Epilogue

Also by MINK

About the Author

FIXER UPPER

MINK

Fixing up an old house isn't exactly high on my bucket list. But finding a lost treasure? That lands right near the top. So, I take a job as caretaker of the Devereaux Estate, do some odd jobs here and there for its batty owner, and spend the rest of my time looking for the diadem.

Until Charlie shows up. She threatens to upend my search, but not because she's onto me—it's because I can't seem to get enough of her. With curves for miles and an innocence I can't resist, she's quickly becoming the only treasure I'd kill to have. And that's not far from the truth, especially when danger comes calling.

“**C**ould you get off me? I’m trying to work here.” I blow a cobweb out of my face.

Dudley ignores my request and continues to make biscuits on my back, his claws digging through my shirt. I’m lying prone and halfway inside the crawlspace of the old ice house. So far all I’ve found are bugs, some gum wrappers that probably date to the 1930s, and evidence of mice nesting in the walls.

I shine my flashlight, trying to find something, anything that would lead to a clue. But there’s nothing.

With a sigh, I wriggle backwards out of the small space until I can sit up. Dudley jumps down, then slinks around so he can sit in my lap.

“Edith sent you here to torment me, didn’t she?” I reluctantly scratch the top of his head. “She’s on to me, and you’re the proof.”

He flops over so I can rub his belly.

I give in and pet him for a short while, then get to my feet and glance around the dilapidated building once more before trudging to the door. It’s not here. I’ve searched this place so many times, but I’ve yet to find it. Maybe I should give up.

With that dark thought in my head, I walk back to the main house and grab my tool bag off the front porch.

When I stride in, Edith calls, “Rowan, that you?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was coming to take a look at the sink. You said it wouldn’t drain properly?”

“That old thing is slower than Christmas.”

I hear the *clunk clunk clunk* of her walker as she appears from the parlor.

“Where have you been?” Her eyes narrow, the wrinkles beside them growing deeper. “You’re covered in dirt.”

“Just working on some things outside.”

She clunks past me toward the kitchen. “This old house always has something wrong with it. That’s why I’m glad you’re here.” She gives me a warm smile.

I nod as she leads me to the sink.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She sits at the kitchen table. “I’ve been wanting to tell you something.” She taps a crooked finger on her chin. “But what was it?”

I glance down the sink, then reach into the drain and pull out what looks like yarn with beads on it. “What’s this?” I keep pulling until the whole dripping thing is free of the drain.

“Oh!” She claps. “I was wondering where I put my macrame.”

I would scold her, but there’s no point. She’ll be back to doing something batty the second I turn around. That’s her way. She lives in this huge estate all alone since her husband passed, and she grows a little nuttier each day. So much so that I’ve convinced her I’m a handyman who was hired by her late husband to help out around the house. I’ve lived here for six months, and she’s never questioned why I dig up the lawn in different spots, bust up concrete in the basement, scour her attic, or explore the many outbuildings on the property.

“Now what was I going to tell you?”

“I’m sure you’ll remember.” I point to the yarn. “Is there somewhere you want me to put this?”

“No, just leave it there. I’m working on some knitting right now. I’ll get back to the macrame later.”

“Just don’t put it down the sink again, okay?”

She crosses her heart. “I won’t.”

“Constance will be here soon to make your dinner.” I flip on the water to make sure it drains. There’s no telling what else she’s stuffed down the sink.

Dudley jumps on the counter beside me, his big green eyes watching the water. I never asked for a sidekick, but that’s what he is. I can’t go anywhere without him following me around.

Once the water seems to be in order, I flip it off and head for the door.

“Wait!” She massages her temples. “I think I remember.”

I lean against the doorframe and force myself to seem interested. She’ll probably tell me that she saw a great big parrot in the yard and wants me to catch it for her or something similar. Edith, for all her misfiring brain bits, is at least entertaining.

“I wanted to tell you ...”

Dudley jumps into her lap.

She strokes him absentmindedly.

“You can tell me whenever you remember.” I back up a step.

“No. Wait!” She holds up a finger. “I know. My granddaughter is coming!”

Now that makes me pause.

“Granddaughter?”

She looks up at me, her gray eyebrows drawing together. “What about my granddaughter?”

I stifle my irritation. “You said your granddaughter is coming.”

“Oh, yes!” She smiles. “Charlie. She’s coming. I’m leaving the house to her.”

Fuck. The last thing I need is someone of sound mind questioning what the hell I’m doing here. My timetable just

moved up. I have to find the treasure, and I have to do it before some meddling granddaughter arrives.

“When’s she coming?” I ask.

A knock sounds at the door. *Oh, fucking hell no.*

Edith’s face lights up. “She’s here!”

CHARLIE

As excited as I am to be here, a tinge of sadness fills me. My grams' home is how I remember it, but I can tell that time has taken its toll on the beautiful Victorian house. It has been over ten years since I visited last. My mother was a bit spiteful after my father up and left. I never understood her logic that keeping me from his mother somehow hurt my father. It really only hurt me.

I don't think it was much of a surprise when my father did leave. He and Mom met when she was on a mission with her church in Turkey. My dad had to be a sweet talker, because he ended up getting her pregnant. They never did marry, which drove my mother insane. I'm pretty sure that was only because of how others might have perceived her at the church. Everything in her life centered around that—how she looked to others.

She thought over time she would wear my father down, but in the end, it only drove him away. His trips for work started to become longer and more often. Then he stopped coming at all. The calls became less frequent until they too eventually stopped. At least that's how I had perceived it.

It wasn't until my mom told me that I would be entering a private school that Grams came back into my life. I didn't have to ask; I could tell from the fancy boarding school that there was no way my mother could afford it. Nor the college that I'd gone to after that. I'm not sure which I disliked more, the private schools or my mother home schooling me. They both had major downfalls. The homeschooling had sheltered

me, and the college atmosphere had overwhelmed me. I never fit in anywhere.

Either way, that doesn't matter at the moment. I'd made my escape. Does it count as an escape if you're an adult? I told my mom spring break wasn't until next week, which was a lie. It has just started, and when it's over, I'm not going back to school. That gives me a week before the university notices that I've up and disappeared. They'll reach out to my mom, and then the jig will be up. I wonder if she'll think I'm here or that I ran off with some boy.

I snort at the idea because it's a ridiculous one, but I'm sure that's where her mind will go first. If it were possible, she'd have a chastity belt on me. Hell, knowing my mom, I'm still shocked that she had casual sex while out on some church mission. I'd love to hear the story, but she'd die before ever telling me. I think she's trying to make up for what she considers her past mistakes with my father by controlling my life. If she keeps me away from the opposite sex then I can't get pregnant.

I take a deep breath and push all thoughts of my mom to the side. I don't want all of that to ruin my reunion with my grams. I lift my hand and knock on the door. The car I'd hired to drive me from the airport is already pulling away. I hope Grams didn't forget that I was coming today. Before I boarded my flight, I called her to make sure.

When I reached out to her a few weeks ago about coming to stay with her, she sounded excited, but I can't help but be a bit nervous. Each time I talk to Grams, she always says that she loves me, but I know I can be a bit much at times. My mom had always said it, but I brushed it off. Mom talked about everyone, so I took the things she said with a grain of salt. It wasn't until I entered school that I realized there was some truth to her words.

I get excited and curious. My mouth opens before my brain really processes what I'm going to say or ask, and I ask everything. It might not have only been my mom that sent my father running. Expecting Grams, I smile when the door swings open. Instead, a very tall, handsome man in dirty jeans

and work boots stands before me. His plain black shirt stretches tightly against his broad chest. For once, I open my mouth and no words come out. The man is twice my size.

“Don’t stand there blocking the entrance. Let my granddaughter in,” I hear Grams say from behind him somewhere. I can’t see her. The man fills up all the space in front of me. He grunts, taking a step back. I get the impression he’s not too happy that I’m here.

“Hi.” I chirp, giving him a smile as I slip past.

“Hey,” he responds, sounding bored now. He doesn’t even bother to offer me his name. I suppose I didn’t introduce myself either.

“Look at you, Charlie!” Grams snags my attention.

“Grams.” I drop the roller bag I’ve been lugging around and rush over to hug her. “When did you get a walker?” I kiss her cheek. She’s so much older than I remember. A tinge of resentment fills me for all the time I’ve missed.

I’ll never forget the one summer I got to stay with her. It was one of the best of my life. Grams’ love was different from my mom’s. There weren’t strings attached to it. She just loved me and accepted me for me. With my father, I was always trying to impress him or make him like me so that maybe he’d come around more. With Grams, I could be myself. It had been the same with Grandpa.

“It’s a big house. I need it to get around sometimes. Make sure I don’t fall.” She cups my cheeks in her wrinkled hands. “You’ve gotten so tall.”

“Tall?” I laugh. I don’t think anyone has ever called me that.

“Since I last saw you in person.” My smile falters at the reminder of how much time we’ve lost together. “Your mom can be a real bitch sometimes.”

I burst into laughter. Grams might be a little older, but her sense of humor hasn’t changed a bit.

“I suppose she can.” Maybe Grams won’t be so mad that I dropped out of college and made my escape. Then again, she

has been the one paying for it. I'll save that for another day.
"I'm just happy I could come."

"You're always welcome here, dear. Are you hungry?
Constance will be here soon to prepare dinner."

"I could eat." I peek over to see the man still standing by the door watching me.

"Good, come. I've been working on my macrame. Rowan found where I'd left the last one I made. I'll show you."

Rowan—even his name is big and solid. A million questions linger on the tip of my tongue, but I fight them back. It's a battle I'm sure to lose.

Edith rambles about yarn and beads while showing the girl her drenched project I extracted from the kitchen drain. I should go and do some research on Charlie Devereaux, find out where the hell she came from.

I'm familiar with her name, though she didn't figure too much in all the recon I did on the Devereauxs. My focus was more on her father, on the man who may be the only person alive with knowledge of the diadem's whereabouts. I know for certain he brought it home with him nineteen years ago after finding it and several other rare artifacts in a Turkish dig site. He's still wanted for the extensive theft, though Interpol has long since let the dust settle on that warrant. After that, he brought the treasures here to his parents' home. I don't think the diadem ever left the premises. It was far too hot and too valuable for him to offload it, so he stashed it somewhere on the property, then left and sold his other stolen goods on the black market for hefty sums.

The last thing I need is another person on the estate, one who might be a little too interested in my little projects and dig sites. Fuck, this is going to be a mess. But I can't stop now. I've already wasted so much time looking for the diadem, and there's no going back. I have to find it.

"This is so creative." Charlie leans over to look at the bits of yarn and beads.

"It's sort of like knitting, you see?" Edith holds up a tangle of yarn between her hands. "But all you have to do is make

knots. I've always been good at that, getting things all twisted and tied up." She smiles, her loving gaze on her granddaughter's face.

My gaze, though, has strayed to her granddaughter's ass. She's wearing a dress that molds around her hips then flows out in a skirt. Charlie is petite, but she doesn't lack curves. In fact, she has everything right where I like it, not to mention the long hair that flows down her back in gentle waves.

"Rowan, something the matter?" Edith's eyes glint as I look up.

"No, Edith." I can't believe she busted me. Sometimes, Edith seems like ten pounds of nuttiness stuffed in a five-pound bag. But there are other times—like right now—that make me wonder if it's all an act. She's sharp in unexpected ways. Then again, she did just stuff her yarn project down the sink and forgot she'd done it. "I should get going."

"Charlie, Rowan is my handyman. He fixes everything that breaks around here, and that's quite a lot. Rowan, why don't you show Charlie around the place? It's been a long time since she came for a visit, and you're the only one who knows the house and grounds almost as good as me." She waggles her brows as Charlie turns around, her blue eyes seeking me out.

"I have some work I need to—"

"Nonsense." She waves a hand at me. "Go on. When Constance gets here, I'll call for you. She's bringing enough ingredients to cook for all three of us."

I cock my head to the side. Now how in the hell did she manage to plan dinner ahead for all three of us when half the time, I'm not even sure she knows what time of day it is?

"Go, go." She shoos Charlie toward me.

"You didn't hire me to give tours, Edith." I cross my arms over my chest.

Charlie halts. "No, that's okay. I can just—"

"Oh, stop trying to act so tough," Edith scolds. "What are you, scared of her?"

I narrow my eyes at the old woman. She narrows hers right back.

“He’s taking you. That’s final.” Edith stabs a gnarled finger at me. “I’d beat you with a wet noodle if I had one.”

I grit my teeth, then realize Edith isn’t going to give in. She has that look on her face—the same one when she told me there was a ghost in her wall making a ticking sound and refused to listen to reason. Her mind’s made up. And—like with the nonexistent ticking—either I give in to her wishes, or I listen to her nonstop harassment for hours on end.

“Yes, I’ll take you on a tour. Come on.” I hitch my thumb over my shoulder.

“Um, okay.” Charlie shrugs. “It *has* been a while.”

“We’ll have plenty of time together. Don’t you worry. A whole week for spring break, that’s lots of time.” Edith drops the yarn, then drapes the still-soggy macrame on her craft table. “Going to be perfect.” She smiles down at it.

“You don’t have to do this.” Charlie keeps her voice low. “If you’re busy, I unders—”

“It’s fine,” I say, more swiftly than I intended.

She lowers her gaze. “Okay.”

Fuck, now I feel like an asshole. That’s never bothered me before, so I won’t let it start now. I shake it off and stride into the hallway. “The house was built in 1887 by your ancestors Grady and Virginia Devereaux. They’d amassed a small fortune from their textile plants, where they employed skilled laborers to weave fabrics that were then sold all over the world. Virginia took a liking to these woods when she and Grady were traveling through to deliver a load of goods to the nearby port. Grady bought the property as a surprise for her, and they began building later that year.”

“Wow, you know so much.” She stands beside me as I stare up at a painting of Grady and Virginia. He wears a slight half smile, his hand on the back of Virginia’s chair as he stares down at his wife. Virginia, though, she looks right at the painter, a hint of mischief in her gaze. “They look happy.”

Charlie smiles up at them. “I remember seeing this when I was younger, and I always thought she seemed like she was hiding a secret. Like the Mona Lisa, but far more scandalous.”

I nod. She must have an eye for art. I’ve thought along similar lines, but I’ve never been able to put it into words the way she just did.

I clear my throat and continue, “The house was built in the Queen Anne Victorian style, which is why the exterior has interesting paint choices—all original colors—and the design is asymmetrical with a widow’s walk at the highest roof elevation.”

“Widow’s walk?” she asks.

“A term from when wives would climb to the highest peak of their house to look out at the sea and try to find their husband’s ship. Often, if it came to that, she was already a widow.”

“Yikes.” She hugs herself.

I edge closer to her, though I have no clue why. “Virginia liked the drama of it. That’s all. And she certainly had her quirks.” I lean down and push against the paneled wall beneath her portrait. A spring clicks, and the panel swings open, revealing a secret passage between the pantry and the back bedroom.

“Wow!” She leans down, giving me another view of her heart-shaped ass. “That’s so cool!”

“There are lots of places like this all over the house, and she included them in the outbuildings, as well.”

She stands and turns to me. “I had no idea. My mom never told me any of this stuff.” Her mouth pulls down a little, disappointment in her tone.

For some reason—fuck knows why—I want to comfort her. “She probably didn’t know. She was never a full Devereaux, was she? They didn’t actually marry.” I close the panel.

“Grams told you?” she asks.

No, but my research did. “Every family has a past.”

She seems to consider my words. “Yeah, I get that. Mine’s just ...” She shrugs.

“My family wasn’t exactly perfect, either.” I lead her along the hallway, my hand at her elbow. A thrill pulses through me at the contact and at the fact that it feels comfortable, normal even, for me to be touching her casually. She doesn’t pull away.

“Where are you from, Rowan?”

This is not a road I want to go down. The more information I give her, the more she’ll be able to give to the police once I’ve disappeared with the diadem. “I was born abroad, but my parents raised me in the States. Here and there.” I stop and point upward.

She cranes her head back.

“The spiral stair was another of Virginia’s ideas. She liked the dizzying look of it, the way it climbs all the way to the third floor and has stained glass skylights at the top.”

She smiles, the warmth of her memory lighting up her delicate features. “I used to love standing here and looking up. Sometimes I’d put my arms out and spin so fast I thought I’d pass out.”

“I think Virginia would’ve loved that.” I watch her, my heart tripping over itself as I take her in. She’s stunning, a beauty that sends heat racing along my skin. But that’s not why I’m here. She’s a distraction, a stunning, innocent one that threatens to throw me off my purpose.

I won’t let her. I’ll find my diadem, steal it, then leave this place for good. No more Devereauxs, and certainly no more of the girl who threatens to stymie my search and shake my focus.

CHARLIE

“Are you moving in?” Rowan asks, placing my giant roller suitcase down in front of the bed. There was no way I was getting it up the stairs. The bedroom is the same one I’d stayed in when I was a kid. It’s bigger than my dorm room. A sense of belonging tries to settle over me, but I push it away, not wanting to get attached.

“Ahh, I...” I trail off. I have no clue how long I’m going to be here. Grams thinks I’m here for a week. That’s the amount of time I have to talk her into letting me stay longer. I know Mom wouldn’t allow me to go back home. That way I wouldn’t have any other option but to go back to school. Not that I wanted to go stay with her.

I’m not very good at lying. I’m shocked I’ve made it this far without being busted somehow. Thank goodness my mom is so wrapped up in her own things, thinking I’m tucked away at school, that I’ve only been texting with her. But I know that’s only going to last so long. Soon enough, she’ll be back to trying to control my life.

“This thing weighs more than you,” Rowan adds, filling in the silence.

I glance down at myself. The suitcase has almost everything I own. I’d shoved whatever I could in it until it was full. I had to sit on it just to get it closed. It’s not even my suitcase. I stole it from Clare Thompson, promising myself that I wouldn’t feel guilt over it.

Clare has made my dorm life hell. I thought college would be different from boarding school. It wasn't. It was just another set of mean girls with new names to learn. One of the downsides to being at a fancy school is everyone is rich. Something that I'm not. The only reason I was even able to attend was because of Grams. I'm awkward by nature, and knowing that I wasn't in the same financial situation as the rest of the girls there only made that worse.

"I had to pay extra because it was over the weight limit." I nod toward my bag.

I didn't know that was a thing—that your luggage was only allowed to weigh so much or you got charged for it. It was an expense I hadn't been counting on. I'm going to need to get a job.

I brush my hands down the front of my dress that now has wrinkles in it. Wait a second, did he make that comment because I'm curvy? At least curvier than all the other girls, it felt like. It was one of the many things Clare pointed out when she was throwing her jabs at me.

"I didn't mean that like how it sounds," Rowan rushes to say. "You're just tiny."

"Tiny?" I smile. "I suppose to you everyone is tiny."

"Shit, sorry. I was only teasing." He runs his fingers through his short brown hair.

I can't stop staring at him. I was worried he might ask if I had a staring problem. Which I think I do. Is it him or the fact that I'm not used to being around the opposite sex? The boy that sat next to me on the plane didn't cause this reaction. He also didn't smell as good as Rowan either.

"A fun teasing? Right?" Would that be considered flirting? I don't think he meant it to be mean. He's been nice so far but distant too. He could merely be putting up with me because I'm Grams' granddaughter and he works for her.

"Of course." He gives me a bewildered expression like that's the only kind of teasing someone could do. My stomach

tightens when another kind of teasing comes to mind. The kind I've only read about. "Like you would do with your kid sister."

Ouch.

"Okay." I lick my lips. "So you're not flirting with me?" I blurt out. Crap. I can't ever keep my mouth closed when I should. Most times as soon as a thought enters my mind, it's spilling from my lips.

"No." He puts his hands out.

"It's okay if you were." I shrug. "It might be nice." No one has ever flirted with me before.

"I'm too old to be flirting."

"There is an age limit on flirting?" Wow, I really know nothing about this. I'm more out of touch than I realized.

My mom's plan was working. She kept me away from men so long that I'm clueless when it comes to them. Most girls my age don't even have their virginity anymore. I bet Rowan could totally fix that for me. Once I thought about buying one of those toys some of the other girls had, but I was scared what the charge on my debit card would come up as, since my mom monitors it. I knew if I were to do it and she found out, she would most definitely turn me over to a nunnery.

"I'm not flirting." His tone is firmer now.

"Can I flirt with you?"

"What? No." He takes a step back.

"Oh." I can't hide my disappointment. "Is it 'cause I'm—" I motion down to my body. "Over the weight limit?"

"Fucking hell." He runs his hand down his face. "No, because you're the perfect fucking weight." His eyes linger on my body before he abruptly pulls his gaze away.

"I don't understand."

"Clearly," he mutters, likely growing annoyed with me. I'm ruining this. I'd been so good when he'd given me the tour of the house. The more I'm around him, the more my mind wanders to dirty things.

“I’m sorry. I won’t flirt with you.” That’s a lie, and I know it.
“I mean, I’ll try not to. It might be hard though.”

“I should—”

“*Meow.*” Dudley comes trotting into my room, cutting Rowan off.

“Dudley!” I rush over to him. He’d been but a kitten the last time I saw him. “Do you remember me?” I pick him up from the floor and cuddle him close. He purrs loudly. “You’re so cuddly.”

He butts his head against my chin.

“I’m going to head down.”

“Okay, I’m going to change real quick. Will you tell Grams I’ll be right down for dinner?” He nods before fleeing my bedroom. “I’m not so sure he likes me.” I kiss Dudley on the top of his head before setting him down on my bed. “But you do.” I give him one more scratch before I go to open my suitcase. It explodes, clothes and books spilling out before I get it a quarter unzipped.

I pick up a pair of plain white panties. I know they’re basic, but it’s all I own. I don’t have anything remotely sexy. No wonder Rowan doesn’t want me flirting with him.

I usually don't eat at the house with Edith, no matter how many times she's invited me. I just prefer to be alone, or maybe I prefer to stew over the fact that I've been here for months and feel like I'm no closer to finding the diadem. Without it, all this time has been a monumental waste.

"Nice to see you, Rowan." Constance bustles around in the kitchen as I take my seat at the table. I'd offer to help, but that would likely lead to disaster, so I sit instead.

Edith is staring at her phone, her reading glasses firmly across the bridge of her nose. "You have to see this." She turns her phone toward me, and there's a video of cats getting scared of cucumbers over and over again. "I've got to get a cucumber and set Dudley up. We'd make a fortune on this TikTok thing!" She laughs and pulls her phone back, her grin firmly in place. "I was thinking about doing an OnlyFans. There's lots of men into single women with a perfect body like mine. They'd pay to see it. Top dollar."

This is one of the myriad reasons I don't stay to dinner. Edith and her craziness. It's amusing, but I could spend my time better doing more research or actually searching the property.

Dudley struts in, and my gaze rises to meet Charlie's. She's changed into a kitten sweatshirt and a set of fluffy shorts with cozy slippers on her feet. Her cheeks turn pink as she returns my stare, her teeth pressing into her plump bottom lip.

It's like she has no fucking clue what effect she has on me. I don't understand it, but since the moment she walked in, she's

what I keep thinking about. This has never happened before. I've been on plenty of jobs, met plenty of women, but damn, this one's gotten under my skin in a way that seems impossible. But here I am, almost drooling over her as she takes a seat across from me.

I swallow thickly and remind myself that she's too young. Still in college, for Chrissakes. I can't be thinking about her as anything other than an unwanted distraction. Edith is easy enough to snow, but I'm not foolish enough that I'll be able to fool her *and* her granddaughter regarding my true purpose here.

"I sure wish I had an outfit like that." Edith puts her phone down and beams at Charlie.

"You want one? I can order it for you. The shorts are from Shein, and I got the top off Etsy. The shoes were in a bargain bin at the grocery store near campus, but I'm sure I can find you something similar."

"Sounds good to me." Edith nods as Constance brings out a huge bowl of fried chicken. "I'll give you the Wi-Fi and my credit card. Go to town."

"Oh, no." Charlie puts her hand over Edith's. "I can get it. You don't have to do that."

"Fiddlesticks, dear. I want you to spend my money. It's not like I can take it with me." She pats Charlie's hand. "What's mine is yours."

Actually, what's Edith's is *mine*, but that only concerns the diadem.

"Rowan, you seem out of sorts this evening." Edith turns her eyes on me. "Is it so awful having to dine with an old woman and her beautiful granddaughter?"

"No." I drape my napkin across my lap as Constance brings in a steaming casserole dish full of macaroni and cheese.

She bends low over the table, doing her best to give me a view down her shirt. I glance away. Edith isn't the only reason I try to avoid the house at mealtimes. Constance has been sniffing

around me since I got here. I don't want to give her the wrong idea.

"This looks so good!" Charlie smiles big, her heart-shaped face lit with warmth.

God, why does that smile make my chest hurt? I rub my sternum for a moment, then see Edith staring at me with a smug expression, so I drop my hand.

"Dig in." She reaches for a chicken drumstick.

"What piece do you want, Rowan?" Charlie asks.

"Whichever one you don't," I reply and grab the bowl, holding it out to her so she can choose.

"Oh, thank you." She takes the other drumstick, and I grab the two thighs.

"It's been a long time since I had fried chicken." Edith takes a big bite, the skin crunching between her teeth. "And Constance is such a good cook."

I scoop Charlie some macaroni and cheese, piling it on the side of her plate.

"No, that's enough," she says around her food. "I'll burst."

I want to see her full and happy. Which is fucking bizarre. Why should I care? I shake my head, trying to clear it, then put the serving spoon down.

"I'll have some too," Edith chimes in, that sly expression still on her face.

"Sorry." I serve her, then add some to my plate.

When Constance brings a plate of sauteed broccoli, she leans over my shoulder, her prodigious chest pressing into my shoulder. I lean away.

"Excuse me, sugar," she purrs.

I grunt a response, and once she's gone, I pick up the serving tongs and put some broccoli on Charlie's plate.

"Isn't he just the biggest gentleman, Charlie?" Edith takes another huge bite of chicken, chewing with gusto.

“You really are.” Charlie nods. “Since I’m going to be around for a little while, maybe you can show me what you do here. I love watching home improvement shows—though I can’t really be a DIY-er since I don’t have my own place. I bet you know all sorts of cool stuff.”

God, her eyes are so warm as she looks at me. My kneejerk reaction is that I should tell her to mind her own business and I’ll mind mine. That’s exactly what would pop out of my mouth to anyone else who asked to snoop over my shoulder.

But as I look at her, those words don’t come out. In fact, something much more horrifying does. “That’d be nice. I get started at about nine in the morning, going to be taking down some of the painted tile on the front and refinishing it.” What. The. Fuck. Rowan?

She nods. “Oh my God, I’d love to help!”

I take a scalding hot bite of my macaroni and cheese and wonder why I just decided to up and fuck myself over because I was charmed by a kitten T-shirt and a pretty face.

“We’re going to have a good time.” Edith gives me a knowing look and waggles her brows. “A damned good time, indeed.”

CHARLIE

“So what do you think?” I pull at the bottom of my jean shorts. “Did I cut them evenly?” Dudley stares at me from my unmade bed. There was no way I could make it with him all cuddled up on it. “You’re not being very helpful.” I go over to the mirror to check for myself. “I think they might be a tad uneven.” I pull them down my legs and fold them over to check.

I took an old pair of jeans and made shorts out of them. I’m not supposed to flirt with Rowan, but can I tempt him? Am I tempting material? A lot of girls wear booty shorts, and I know I have a curvy backside. I never gave it much thought until this morning when I was getting dressed to meet up with Rowan. I wanted to look sexy for him. For him to be attracted to me. Hopefully, these shorts are a step in the right direction.

“The heck?” When I fold the jeans over, they match in length on both sides. “Oh my God! One of my legs must be longer than the other.” How have I never noticed this before? I stand in front of the mirror in my panties and shirt. Without the shorts, my legs match.

A knock sounds from my door.

“Come in,” I call.

“I was going to—” I spin around to see Rowan standing in the doorway.

“Fuck, sorry.” He turns around. “You said come in.” Even the sound of his gruff voice is sexy.

“You can. In fact, I need your help.” Maybe he can solve the mystery of what’s going on with my legs.

“Maybe put some pants on first?”

My eyes linger on his backside. Rowan has a nice ass too. I bet it’s firm. My fingers itch to touch it to check if I’m right, but I know that’s not appropriate.

“You dressed?” he asks, and I realize I got lost in thoughts of his ass. I guess it’s not only boys who can have a thing for them.

“I’m dressed.”

He turns back around. “Charlie.” He grits out, his gaze sliding down my body.

“What? I am dressed. Besides, I need your help.”

“You’re not dressed.”

“It’s underwear. Same as a bathing suit.”

He sucks in a deep breath. Am I annoying him already? We haven’t even started yet.

“What do you need my help with?”

“My legs.” I glance down at them.

“They look fucking good to me.”

“But are they uneven?”

“Uneven?” His eyebrows crash down together as if I’ve asked him something absurd.

“This is serious. One is longer than the other!” His eyes linger on my legs, moving up and down, taking in every inch of them. But do each of them have the same amount of inches? That’s the question I need answered.

“I should get a better look.” He steps over the threshold into my bedroom. His booted foot kicks the door closed behind him.

“Here, I’ll show you.” I turn and bend to pick up the shorts. He mutters something, but I can’t make it out. “What?”

“Nothing.” Whoa. He’s much closer than I thought he was.
“Let me check without the shorts on first.”

“Okay.” My eyes widen when he drops to his knees in front of me. “Oh.” I gasp when his fingers make contact with the outside of my thigh. His touch is rough against my skin. It sends goosebumps throughout my whole body.

I stand unmoving as his fingers trail down one leg and then the other before coming back to the top to stop at my hips over my panties.

“Damn you smell good,” I hear him say under his breath.

“Really? Cause I was thinking you smelled good too yesterday.” I wanted to tell him then, but thought it might be weird, so I kept it to myself.

“And what do I smell like?”

“A man.” I lick my lips. “What do I smell like?”

“Innocence.” He drops his hand from my hip and gets to his feet. I miss his touch immediately. “Your legs are perfect,” he grumbles now, sounding mad. “I’ll meet you downstairs in an hour.”

“I thought you said—”

“An hour. Need to handle something.” With that, he bolts for the door before I can ask him anything else.

“What was that?”

Dudley doesn’t respond to my question. He never does.

My experience with men is pretty much nonexistent so I’m not even going to try to make sense of what had Rowan running out of here so quickly. Frustrated that I’m already annoying Rowan, I pull my shorts back on and leave it be.

“Now I have to wait a whole other hour.” It’s almost nine. For most of the night, I tossed and turned, excited about getting to spend the day with Rowan. I watched a handful of videos on how to refinish painted tiles on the outside of a home. I wanted to have some knowledge so I could impress him.

I'd gotten the whole idea of wearing something sexy because of Constance. I bend over in front of the mirror. The top of my shirt dips open to give a peek of my boobs.

"I should change." Constance is way better at flirting than I am. Rowan even lets her do it. Oh God. What if they have a thing? A pit forms in my stomach. That would make sense. She's more his age and knows what she's doing.

Rowan's comment about me being innocent lingers in my mind. I don't think that's a good thing. Innocence isn't sexy. When I think of Rowan having his way with a woman, which I had last night more times than I want to admit, it was aggressive and domineering. He's been nice, but I sense there something not so nice about him lingering under the surface. And for some reason, I find myself wanting to bring that part of him out.

I want to see it for myself. No, I need to have it. This could be my only chance before I'm shipped back to school and locked away.

But none of that matters if he already belongs to someone else.

*M*y cock is so hard it fucking aches. I tear through the door to my place, slam it behind me, then stride to my bathroom.

Fumbling at my jeans, I jerk my fly down. All I can see is Charlie—her pussy barely covered by panties, her scent in my nose, her skin beneath my palms.

I stroke myself, a groan coming from me as I imagine it's her hand on me, her big eyes staring up at me as she bites her lip.

“Fuck!” I grunt as I come, thick, hot ropes of it landing in my sink as I murmur her name.

Bracing myself against the wall next to the mirror, I suck in a huge breath and listen to the pounding of my heart.

I broke. I fucking fell apart and ran back here to jack myself off like a goddamn teenager. I rest my forehead on my arm and try to get my breathing under control. Slowly, I do. But the release I just had—it wasn't what I needed. It may take the edge off, but Charlie is still there behind my eyelids, her innocent face and devilish body tormenting me and making me hard again.

“Get it together,” I growl at myself and turn on the sink, splashing water around the basin and rinsing my hands, then wetting my face. “Get it to-fucking-gether.” I glare at my reflection and zip up my jeans.

She's rattled me. Badly. When I opened her door and found her there in nothing but her panties and a T-shirt, my knees

went weak. And when she bent over? I thought I might rip her panties off and plunge into her from behind. I bite my knuckle and try to force the mental image away.

“Um, Rowan?”

I whirl as a knock sounds at my front door. “Yes?” My voice is harsher than I intended.

“Sorry. I just feel like I kind of screwed up before. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable, especially if you’re already taken. I know that must be awkward to have someone throwing herself at you, and I’m—”

“What?” I yank the screen door open and stare down at her. “What did you say?”

She tangles her fingers together, color rising in her cheeks. “I was just saying that it’s okay if you don’t want to be around me if you and Constance have a thing.”

“We don’t.”

Her eyes brighten. “You don’t?”

“No.” I’ve never looked twice at Constance. She’s a great cook, and I’ve heard rumors in town that she likes to sleep in a different man’s bed every night. But I’ve never wanted her in mine. In fact, I’ve never wanted anyone in mine, not until this blond temptress showed up. But I can’t say all that, not without coming off like a total fucking creep. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Oh.” She looks even happier.

It makes heat suffuse my chest, my body warming at her nearness. It’s fucking insane. I need to stop this. I’m here for one thing and one thing only—and it’s not Charlie. No matter how badly I want to grab her, drag her inside, and bury my face in her pretty cunt.

“Did you say something?” She cocks her head to the side.

I damn well hope I didn’t say any of that aloud. I clear my throat. “We can get to work.” I move past her and grab my tool belt. “The ladder’s already set up.”

“Okay!” She grins. “I can climb a ladder. Sounds simple enough.”

I take her elbow and lead her down the stairs and into the yard. “Too dangerous. You stay on the ground. I have a job for you.”

“There was a saw by the front steps.” She bounces on the balls of her feet as we walk. “Can I cut things? That sounds like fun.”

I get a flash of her fingers with blood on them, a horrified look on Edith’s face. “Um, no. Not that either. Something better.”

“What could be better than cutting things?” She makes a buzzsaw sound with her lips. It’s so damn cute I swear I might be blushing, but that can’t be right, because I don’t fucking blush.

“Painting.” I show her to my sawhorses where I’ve laid out some of the wood tiles from above the front entryway. “These were originally a bright fuchsia. I matched the paint through old photos. I’ll be carefully removing the tiles and bringing them to you. Then you paint them—two coats at least—and then I’ll replace them. Just doing over the porch will take all day, maybe more.”

She stops and grabs my hand, her skin so perfectly warm against mine. I don’t think I’ve ever felt someone’s touch so deeply, so intimately—and she’s only holding my hand. Her eyes are intense as she says, “You’d really trust me to do that?”

I can’t hide my confusion. “Yes?”

“Oh, sorry.” She shrugs. “It’s just that my mom never thinks I’m capable of doing things on my own. She doesn’t trust me. I mean, I can admit I’m a little clumsy, and I drop things, and sometimes I lose things, but it’s not like I—”

“Shh.” I lean closer and inhale her heavenly scent. “You’ve got this, Charlie. You can do it, and I have total faith in you.”

If I thought she looked angelic before, when she smiles at me with her whole heart, I wonder if I’m going to melt into a puddle. Jesus, she’s gorgeous.

“Thank you!” She squeezes my hand, then lets go and practically bounces to the sawhorses. “I’m totes going to kill this job! I won’t let you down, Rowan. I promise.”

“I know.” All I can do is stare at her as she pets the paint brushes and inspects the little cans of brightly colored paint. She’s so invested, so ... hopeful.

I’d planned this little job as a cover so I could check for hollow places along the home’s façade, but just seeing how happy she is to help—I’m going to make sure the tiles turn out amazing. If only so she can feel proud of herself for a job well done. Something tells me it will be worth it when we’re done.

CHARLIE

“*W*hat do you think?” I stare up at Rowan and try to gauge his reaction. He’s brought more of the tiles down for me. I’ve painted a few already. “Is my stroking okay?” I audibly hear him swallow. “It’s bad, isn’t it? You can be honest.”

“No, it’s perfect, Bunny.” I beam up at him, loving that he’s given me a nickname.

“Bunny?”

“Sorry, it slipped out.”

“You call a lot of people Bunny?” Is that like how some use the word ‘honey’ or ‘babe’? I wonder.

“I don’t call anyone that. You just remind me of a bunny.”

“Bunnies are cute. They have adorably big eyes and fluffy tails,” I wiggle my butt. “Lots of energy.”

“All true,” he agrees.

“So it’s a compliment?” He nods. “Oh! Term of endearment!” I snap my fingers. That’s what it’s called. “I like it.” I smile. It’s nice to be endeared.

Rowan sets down the tiles he brought for me. “I should get back to it.”

“Okay,” I chirp.

When he turns, I pull my phone out and google the word ‘endear.’ I’m pretty sure I know what it means, but now I have

to double check before I get too excited. ‘To be loved or admired by someone or something.’ My heart starts to flutter, but it dawns on me that he hadn’t agreed that it was a term of endearment. I said that. He said he should get back to work.

Damn it.

I go back to painting. I sing Taylor Swift’s new song as I work. Though I’m not sure I’d call this working. It’s fun. I wonder if I could paint more things. In boarding school, I got one semester of art and loved it. It dawns on me that there are so many things I want to try and never had much of an opportunity.

“You’re getting the hang of this.” Rowan moves some of the painted tiles out of the way to put more down.

“It’s fun.” I lick my lips. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He sounds hesitant. I turn to face him, my hand hitting the can of paint in the process. It falls off the table, paint splattering all over Rowan before it hits the ground. Only a few drops land on my bare legs.

“Oh crappers.” I grab one of the paint cloths and try to wipe it off him, but it only smears it, making it worse.

“Bunny,” he snaps, and his hand wraps around my wrist. Wow, they are really big. “Don’t do that,” he grits out. Now I made him mad. That always happens. When I think something is going well, I find a way to ruin it.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s only paint. We can get more, but maybe don’t rub a man’s dick.”

I let out a small gasp. My eyes go to his crotch. The hard outline of his cock pressing against his paint-soaked jeans is unmissable.

“You said ‘dick,’” I blurt out, peeking up at him. “Now I said it.” I sink my teeth into my bottom lip.

I want to ask him to say it again, but that is beyond flirting. It was super hot when he said it. I’ve never heard a man say

anything crude. Sure, I've read it, and the girls at school say it. But not a man standing in front of me that has his hand on me.

"What did you want to ask me?" He keeps his hold on my wrist.

"If you can say dick again?" *Dang it!* I wasn't going to say that. His hold on me tightens.

"Bunnies often find themselves in traps. You really need to be careful when you're around men, Charlie."

"Bunny," I correct. "I like when you call me Bunny."

"You really need to be careful when you're around men, Bunny," he repeats.

"When you say bunnies in traps. I think of myself in a trap. You know, like that BDSM stuff I might have read about."

"Online?" he growls. "In chat groups?" *Oh noes.* This has somehow made him madder than me spilling paint all over him and then rubbing his dick.

"There are chat rooms online for BDSM stuff?" I'd never thought of that before. "Like dating sites but for people who are into BDSM? I'm not, just so we're clear. Not that I'm kink-shaming or anything," I rush to add. "I suppose a light spanking or being tied to a bed doesn't sound terrible. It's the nipple clamps and paddles that scare me." I shiver thinking about it. "My nipples are sensitive, and I don't like pain. I still cry when I get shots. They push it in sooooo deep."

"Stop talking." The firmness of his tone has me sealing my lips together. "I'm going to go clean up." He turns to leave but doesn't let my wrist go. I drop the cloth from my hand and follow after him. It's not until we're in his place that he releases me.

He toes his boots off before he walks into the bathroom. A second later, he comes back with a wet towel. I watch as he leans down and wipes the paint from my legs.

"I'm really sorry. I always—"

"Only paint, Bunny," he says again, his voice back to being soft. It makes a lump form in my throat. Rowan isn't mad I

spilled it. “I’m going to shower and change. You wait here.”

“Okay, I’ll stay right here,” I agree. Even if I want to peek into a few drawers. I can have some self-control. Maybe. “I’ll just play with my phone.” I pull it out of my back pocket.

“Do not look up chat groups.” His face grows deadly serious. If I didn’t know how sweet he was, I might be scared.

“I won’t.”

“I want you to promise it.”

“I promise.” Now I didn’t promise about peeping in the drawers, so that’s still on the table. “Rowan,” I call when he starts to go back toward the bathroom. “Can I ask my original question?”

“Yeah.” He pulls his shirt off, tossing it into a basket. His chest is broad and covered in a thin layer of hair. Rowan really is all man. “Bunny. My eyes are up here.”

“Right.” My whole face warms. When my eyes meet his, I can see he’s smiling.

“Ask.”

“So is it a term of endearment when you call me Bunny?”

“I suppose it is.” With that, he turns to go into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Now I gotta think of a name for him too.

I'm fucking up. This is not what I'm supposed to be doing. Paint sluices down the drain as I finish rinsing off. My jeans are probably ruined, but that's nothing new. I've torn up plenty of clothes crawling around in and under this house and other spots on the property.

I flip the water off and step out, Charlie on my mind. My cock pulses as I remember the way she was touching me, her innocent hands stoking a fire inside me. With the way the towel tents around my cock as I wrap the material around my waist, it seems the fire is still burning perilously high.

I want her. That's one thing about me—I know myself. I'm honest with myself, even if I'm dishonest with everyone else. Though something tells me I'm going to have a hard time being dishonest to Charlie. She's so fucking cute and naïve. She looks at me like I'm a goddamn treat. That's new. Most people fear me. I'm big, I'm practically sullen all the damn time, and I don't take kindly to people trying to talk to me, much less touch me. But with Charlie, all that's different.

Sighing, I crack the door to look for her. When I don't see her, I figure she must've gone back to the house. Maybe she wanted a shower, too. I try to ignore the pain of regret I feel at her leaving. Then I imagine her looking up BDSM chat groups, and my blood boils again. Some motherfucker in there would love to take advantage of my Bunny, and I sure as hell am not going to let that happen.

Not that she's mine. She's not.

I stride into my bedroom and stop.

Bunny is bent over my dresser, her round ass filling out her shorts to perfection as she snoops. She hasn't heard me come in and mumbles to herself as she sorts through my things.

"No whips in here. That's probably good. Though I might not mind some of those fluffy handcuffs. So cute." She pulls out one of my T-shirts and holds it to her nose, inhaling deeply and letting it out with a contented "*hmmmm*."

I was already on the verge of having to rub one out. But now? Now that's not an option, not when I have my Bunny caught in a trap.

"You shouldn't snoop through people's things."

She jumps and turns around, my shirt still to her nose as I close my bedroom door behind me. Her gaze drops to my waist, her eyes widening as she sees my cock pressing against the damp towel.

"I was just, um. I was ... That's so big." She licks her lips.

"It's dangerous to get caught in a man's room, Bunny." I step toward her, her lips parting on an exhale as she drops my shirt.

She nods. "Uh huh. It's, um, probably something I should get punished for. Just not, um, not too much."

I laugh, the sound low and gravelly as I think about all the ways I'd love to punish her tight little body. "You're right." I'm standing right in front of her now, her nipples almost brushing against me. "Do you think you should be punished?"

"By you? Yes." She nods vigorously. "Definitely."

I'm filthy and wrong, but I'm over the goddamn edge. She pushed me there before I even realized there was a cliff.

"You've never had a cock in that pretty mouth, have you?" I rub my thumb across her bottom lip.

Her eyes widen. "N-no."

I lean down, my lips so close to hers. "I think that would make a proper punishment, don't you? My cock down your throat?"

Her breath hitches. “Y-yes.”

I cut the distance between us, pressing my mouth to hers.

She gasps, and I take the opening and swipe my tongue between her lips, tasting her deeply. Fuck, she’s perfect. I press against her, arching her back over my dresser as I feel every bit of her.

Letting my towel drop, I grip her ass, squeezing as she moans into my mouth. I coax her tongue to dance with mine, and my cock strains toward her, demanding I take what I want. What I want is all of her, but what she wants is punishment. I’m happy to oblige.

I pull back, breaking our kiss as I stare into her dazed eyes. “Get on your knees, Bunny.”

She licks her lips as I back up a step, then she lowers herself in front of me. Her eyes go straight to my cock.

“Oh, my.” She reaches up and runs her finger along my shaft.

“Put it in your mouth, Bunny. You have to pay for snooping.”

“Yes.” She nods contritely, then opens her mouth and uses her tongue to swipe against the head of my cock.

I almost come right then and there. “Fuck!” I grip the edge of the dresser.

“Did I do it wrong?” She looks up at me with those beautiful eyes.

“In your mouth,” I grate.

She opens wide, her pink tongue sliding along the bottom of my shaft as she seals her lips around me.

I want to thrust, to find her throat and use it. But I won’t hurt her. I won’t ruin this fantasy—not for her and not for me.

“Grip the base and move your head back and forth. I want to feel your tongue all over me.”

She nods, driving me fucking wild with the movement, then wraps her fingers around me. Moving closer, she takes me as

far as she can go, then gags a little. Her eyes get teary, and it's so fucking hot I have to bite my cheek to keep from coming.

"That's it." I don't trust myself to put my hands in her hair, even though I'm dying to. I don't want to be rough. I want her to discover me, discover what she likes to do.

She takes me deep again, and I groan, my body so tense it feels like it might break in a hundred different places.

"Mmmm," she hums against my shaft, and I watch as she sneaks her other hand between her legs.

"That's it, Bunny. Rub your clit. I'm going to spill down your throat when you come."

Her moan lights me up like a fucking LED, and I can't help but thrust against her soft tongue. She moans again, her fingers sliding under her panties as she strokes herself faster, her mouth moving in time as she loses herself to pleasure. I watch her, unable to take my eyes off her.

My balls draw up, my cock demanding release, but I won't let go. Not until I know she's coming.

"That's a good girl. Take all of me. I'm going to give you every last drop of cum, Bunny. Swallow it for me."

Her eyes roll back as she hollows out her cheeks and moans around my cock, the vibration sending me over the edge. I push deeper into her mouth and come, my cock kicking as I groan with pure pleasure, the greatest feeling I've ever experienced. I feel as she swallows, her throat working against my head as I grip the dresser so hard my knuckles go white.

"Bunny!" I choke the word out as she licks my head, sucking my release down and cleaning me off.

When I pull free from her mouth, she opens her eyes and looks up at me.

I sink to my knees, pull her hand from her panties, and suck her fingers, relishing her taste as she stares at me, her eyes glassy. When I've licked her clean, I pull her fingers from my mouth. "Do you feel like you've been punished enough, Bunny?"

She smirks, and her tongue comes out to wet her lips. “I don’t know. We might have to do it again for me to really get the lesson.”

“*I*t still tingles.” I peek over at Rowan.

We’re in his truck headed toward town to get more paint. I bite the inside of my cheek when he licks his lips. Is he thinking about when he tasted it? I’m not sure which was hotter, being on my knees in front of him pleasuring him or watching him suck me off his fingers. It’s all surreal. Nothing this exciting has ever happened in my life.

“I shouldn’t have made you do that.”

My stomach drops at his words. Does he regret it? Was I terrible at it? So many thoughts run through my mind.

“Cause I was bad at it?” I wring my fingers together, staring down at my lap. Now I can’t bear to look at him. I thought he enjoyed what I did, but I should have known better. I mean, I have zero experience.

“What? Fuck no!”

“I’ll get better.” We both speak at the same time. Jeez. I sound a bit pathetic.

“If you get any better, you’ll kill me.”

“So you liked it?” I jerk my head back up, his words making me feel better.

“‘Like’ is putting it mildly.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I *loved* punishing you, Bunny.”

I can't help but smile. "I'm not sure you can call that punishment. If it is, I'm going to dump the next can of paint over your head and sneak into your place again." Rowan reaches over and puts his hand on my thigh. His fingers are rough against my skin but in the best possible way. He really is all man.

"Be a good girl, Bunny. There are other ways for me to punish you."

"Really, like what? Spanking me?" The thought of his hand coming down on me only causes the tingle between my thighs to grow more intense. I never thought I would like something like that, but with him it's different. I find myself craving it.

"You don't like pain." He remembered.

"Then what?" His hand slips farther up my thigh. My legs part. I'm shameless, and I don't care. I want his touch. His fingers are both rough and soft against my skin as they continue to caress me.

All rational thoughts leave me, and the only thing I can focus on is him giving me what I need. I'm so wet. I can feel the dampness on my panties. A groan comes from him when his fingers get to the edge of my jean shorts. He caresses up and down the side of them, grazing my panties.

"Rowan?" I wiggle in my seat. My clit is starting to throb.

"Bad girls don't get orgasms." He quickly withdraws his hand and puts it on the steering wheel.

"That's rude."

"I guess we'll both have to suffer together." The outline of his hard cock in his jeans is easy to make out.

"Does it hurt being all stuffed in there?"

"Stuffed in there?" He chuckles.

"You can take it out if you want."

"Bunny." He growls. "I'm driving."

"I'm only saying it wouldn't offend me at all. I *am* worried about it fitting inside me. I might be chubby, but I'm short." I

glance down between my legs thinking how far he would actually go inside me. “It would go all the way here.” I lift my shirt and touch below my belly button to show him.

“You know how to stroke a man’s ego.” He shakes his head, but he’s smiling. “It will fit. Put your shirt down.” I release it to fall back into place.

“So we’ll be having sex? Tonight?”

Rowan rolls to a stop at the sign. His gaze is now fixated on me, pinning me in place. I’ve never known someone to have such dark eyes. The intensity in them is alluring. I’m always wondering which stare I might get from him, if his eyes will darken or narrow. It’s hot, but I also love when the smile lines form around the edges of them when he finds something funny.

“I’ve never in my life met someone like you.”

I open my mouth to ask a question, but he beats me to it. “It’s a compliment, Bunny. Why do you always think the worst about yourself and that everything is an insult?”

I shrug, my attention going out the window. Who wants to tell the man you’re crushing on that the rest of the world thinks you’re strange? Not me, that’s for sure. I don’t know why he doesn’t think so, but I don’t want that to change. For the time being, I’m a normal girl to him. One that only has a few more days to experience life until my mother is on to me.

He doesn’t push for a response before he starts driving again. The rest of the drive is in silence. I perk up when I see the town come into view. I’d come in from the other direction, so I didn’t get to see this part of it.

“This place is cute.” We drive through what I’m guessing is the main strip of the small town. “Can we go to the diner? Oh, a dress shop!”

“Are you talking to me again?”

“I wasn’t not talking.”

“You went five minutes without saying a word. That’s a record.”

“Hey.” I reach over and smack his shoulder. “Were you counting? Missing my random chatter?”

“I like hearing you.” My chest warms.

I don’t think anyone has ever said that to me before. Usually, I’m called annoying because I tend to talk so much.

“You’re muscly.” The hand I used to smack his shoulder is now rubbing on him. Rowan pulls into a parking spot between a hardware store and a bakery. He unclips my seatbelt. Before I know it, he has me pulled over into his lap, straddling him.

“Is this what is considered chubby?” He grips my hips, grinding his hard cock against me.

“That’s what some of the girls at school say.”

“You’re wrong, Bunny, or maybe you’re right. I don’t know, but what I do know is you’ve got a body that can most definitely handle me.” His fingers dig into my hips. “Soft and sweet. That’s what a man wants to slip into.”

My face burns with heat.

Rowan leans down and kisses my neck. “Be a good girl when we go into the hardware store, Bunny.”

“I won’t break anything. Or I’ll try not to.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Oh.” I scrunch my nose. What else could I do that would get me in trouble?

“No flirting.”

“But I like it.”

“Then you’ll keep your ass in the truck.”

“Fine.” I choke the one word out. He kisses the tip of my nose. It’s sweet, but the warmth he’d put in my chest seconds ago evaporates. Why doesn’t he want me flirting with him around other people?

I should be used to those kinds of comments, but this one stings more than normal.

She prances ahead of me, her ass filling out her jean shorts to perfection. If I weren't already hard as a rock, one look at her thick thighs would get me there, no problem.

"Roger." I greet the hardware store owner. He looks right past me, following Bunny with his eyes.

"Hey!" I slam my hand on the counter.

He turns to me. "Sorry about that. I got a little distracted."

"Keep your attention on your job," I practically growl.

His eyes widen. "Sorry, Rowan."

I'm being an asshole. I know it. He knows it. Roger and I have been decent acquaintances during my time working for Edith. I shouldn't be barking at him, but goddamn, I don't want him gawking at my girl.

'My girl.' Is that what she is? We've only known each other for a day. Somehow, I've let her get closer to me than people I've known for years. It's like I've fallen under her spell, and there's no way in hell I want to get out of it.

"Rowan?" Roger asks, and I realize he's said my name a few times while I've been lost in thoughts of my Bunny.

"I need more paint. Same colors from this morning. Go ahead and give me a gallon of each. We have a lot of tiles to paint."

"Edith got you working on the façade now?" He walks to the paint counter, and I follow him, though I keep an eye on Bunny, who's messing with rope down at the end of the aisle.

“I work on what I choose to.” I toss a few more paintbrushes onto the counter. “But yes, the façade. I’ll need a topcoat to keep the weather out, too.”

“Sure thing.” He gets to work, and I notice he avoids looking at Bunny. Good, looks like my message went through.

I walk up behind her as she loops some rope over her wrists. “What are you up to?”

She grins. “I was thinking we could do a little tie-up play tonight. What do you think?”

My cock surges at the thought of her tied up on my bed, her legs spread wide, her pussy wet and ripe for the taking. “I think you should stop teasing me.” I take the rope from her.

“I’m not teasing.” She blinks.

“You are too much.” I run my free hand through her hair and grip, then tilt her head back. “Too fucking much.” I kiss her, tonguing her as she melts against me, her hands fisting my shirt as I back her up against the rope display. I can’t stop myself, can’t keep my hands off her. She’s irresistible, and it blows my mind that she doesn’t realize it.

I kiss her deeper, angling her head and sweeping my tongue against hers again and again. She hitches one of her legs onto my hip, and I press against her, my hard cock resting against her belly as she moans into my mouth.

The bell on the shop door rings, and I nibble her bottom lip then pull back. “I’m getting this rope.”

“Good. I can’t wait.” She licks her swollen lips.

I kiss her forehead, then stride back to the paint counter, my cock throbbing.

“Almost done. Just need to mix one more gallon.” Roger hurries around and grabs some stir sticks and a few carpentry pencils, putting them on the counter for me. “Say, the young lady you—”

“She’s none of your concern.”

He winces. "I get it. I was just wondering if she was Edith's granddaughter."

"Why would you wonder that?" I pick up one of the stir sticks.

He shrugs. "My mom used to say that Edith's son had some sort of dark past and that maybe he passed it on to his daughter or something like that. It wasn't really clear, just village gossip. That's all. She looks perfectly normal to me, though."

I snap the stick between two fingers. "Look at the paint, Roger. Not my girl."

"Oh, she's your girlfriend then?" He grabs the last paint bucket. "You're a lucky man."

I am, but that doesn't mean I want him saying a single goddamn thing about my Bunny. I just glare at him as he grabs the buckets and takes them up to the register.

When I turn to look for Bunny, I don't see her. She must be looking at power tools. *Oh, shit.* I hurry down the aisles until I see her bending over and inspecting a circular saw. *Double shit.* She reaches out to touch it. I'm about to call out to warn her when I notice someone standing in the aisle to my left. His arm is moving as he stares at Bunny's backside.

I know instantly what he's doing. Rage like I've never felt before washes through me, lighting my veins on fire as I rush the guy, knocking him into a display of sandpaper that goes flying.

"Bastard!" I rear back and slam my fist into his face. Once, twice, a third time and the bastard is out cold.

"Rowan!" Bunny runs up behind me. "What's happening?"

I stand up and consider kicking the guy. His hand is still in his pants, his nose is bleeding, and I'm almost certain he's going to have a concussion. I fucking hope he does, anyway.

"Nothing. Let's go."

"But he's hurt." She goes to kneel beside him.

"Nope. With me, Bunny." I grab her elbow gently and lead her to the front counter.

“The guy in the aisle back there, let him know if I see him in here again, I’ll be the last thing he ever sees,” I tell Roger.

He blanches. “Oh no.”

“Put it on the tab.” I grab the buckets of paint and the bag of supplies, then lead Bunny from the store.

“What just happened?” she asks as I help her into the truck.

“A pervert got what he deserved.” I fasten her seatbelt for her, then give her a hard kiss on the mouth. “You’re safe whenever you’re with me, Bunny. You can do whatever you want and not worry.”

“Except flirt with you?” She tangles her fingers together.

“What?”

“You told me not to flirt when—”

I kiss her again, a smile on my face as I do it. “I meant I didn’t want you to flirt with *anyone else*.”

She smiles and puts her palms on my cheeks. “I don’t want to flirt with anyone else, silly. Only you.”

I kiss her once more and bite her bottom lip. “Keep it that way, Bunny. That’s my good girl.”

“I want to be your good girl.” She smiles, her eyes lighting up, but then she whispers, “But I kind of want to be punished too.”

“Oh, you already bought yourself a punishment.”

Her lips turn into an adorable pout. “How? I didn’t do anything.”

“You touched the circular saw. Could’ve hurt yourself.”

“So I’m going to be punished?” There’s a devious glint in her eye.

“Absolutely.”

“Wheeee!” She squeals and pulls me in for a kiss.

Something in my heart seems to break free and beat at triple speed, bringing me to life in a way I didn’t know was possible. Not until Bunny.

CHARLIE

I lie back on my bed, wondering if Rowan is going to be at dinner. Why didn't I ask him? I guess I could go over and invite him. We parted ways when we were done working on the tiles for the day. Thankfully, I didn't cause any other disasters after we got back. It was only three when we finished up, but Rowan said he had a few other things he had to check up on.

It took everything in me not to beg to go with him. I'm trying to have some level of cool. The last thing I want is to come off as clingy or desperate. Would it be clingy if I went and asked about dinner? I guess I could wait to see if he shows up. That could chance him not, and that would super blow. My time here is limited. Being clingy might be my only option.

"*Meow.*" Dudley jumps up on the bed.

"What do you mean that ship has sailed? I've been clingy already?" I roll to my side and give Dudley some love. My phone dings. "Oh, crap." I sit up and grab it from the bed. "If I don't read it then I can pretend it's not there." Dudley lets out another meow. "You're right. She'll keep texting if I don't reply." I take a deep breath before I open the message from my mom. I hate that when her name pops up, a sense of dread hits me. It dawns on me that the only person who does call or text that I get excited about is Grams. Maybe I am weird.

Mom: Are you the same size as the last time you were home?

What kind of question is that? I don't bother asking.

Me: Yep.

Mom: Good, I'm ordering you a few new dresses for church.

Her response worries me. I have a closet full of dresses at home my mom deems as church worthy. I hate going to church with her, but I still go. Not that I have a choice.

Me: I don't need any more.

I have plans to order a few things on my own. I won't feel so guilty using Gram's card if I help around here. Plus, I don't want my mom buying dresses that will be useless. I have no plans on going home. The days of my mother making me do things I don't want are coming to an end. I don't think Grams will kick me out. She might be mad, though. I've kinda lied, and she already footed the bill for this semester. But I hate it there, and I think if I tell her that, she'll be okay with me not going back. Grams has always wanted me to be happy.

Mom: There is someone I want you to meet. A new dress is in order.

Oh noes. I do *not* like where this might be going. I knew eventually she was going to start trying to set me up, but I figured she'd wait until after I was done with school. I thought I had more time, but obviously she has other plans.

Me: Okay.

I don't play into her text because I don't want to encourage her. I try to recall the last few times we spoke if she brought up anyone. She talks about a million and one people from her church to me as if I know them. I can't keep them straight. I'd feel bad about it, but I bet my mom couldn't name one girl from my dorm.

Mom: Are you okay?

"Shit." I should be asking a million questions. That's what I'd normally do if I thought she was up to something.

Me: Yeah, studying for a test.

It's way easier to lie when you text.

Mom: Good luck.

I let out a long breath. It's only a matter of days before this jig is up. I'm going to use every one of them and enjoy them to the fullest. If or when my mom puts together that I'm not at school, nor am I coming home, she might make her way here. Her head would explode if she saw Rowan working around Grams' house.

Rolling off the bed, I go and take a shower. I take my time getting ready in hopes that I'll run into Rowan. Who am I kidding? If I don't, I'll end up at his door.

How naughty would it be if I didn't wear panties? My dress hits a bit above my knees. I don't think anything will show. It would only be exciting if Rowan happens to end up with his hand under my dress. What would he think? A smile forms on my lips. There is only one way to find out.

"He won't think I'm a hussy, will he?" I ask Dudley, pulling them off. "Not that there's anything wrong with being one. It might be fun to be one for Rowan. I bet he's used to having women fawn all over him. I've seen it for myself already."

Rowan did get all worked up about the guy at the hardware store. I've never been a fan of violence, but that was kind of hot. It was really twofold. It was nice to have someone stand up for me when they thought I was being treated wrong, but it was also nice to think that I could draw the eyes of other men. That they desired me. It's something I've never felt until Rowan.

I'm not sure if it's some of the comments from girls growing up or the fact that I haven't spent much time around men. The only reason I have to believe that I might not be pretty is because of them. Rowan is the hottest man I've ever seen in my life, and he keeps on touching me. He doesn't want me flirting with anyone else. So I must not be that bad.

"Let's go check on Grams," I call to Dudley. He jumps off the bed, following me out of my bedroom.

I don't see any sign of her in her room or in the sitting room, so I text her.

Me: Where the heck are you?

This house is way too big.

Grams: Sunroom.

I make my way toward the back of the house. When I spot Grams, she has her legs kicked up on a table, leaning back in an oversized chair.

“Whatcha doin?”

“The TikTok.”

“Don’t fall into a thirst trap,” I tease her.

“Why not? You went and fell into one.”

“Grams!”

She only smirks. “He is really hot. Good with his hands too, I bet.”

“Grams!” I can feel the heat on my cheeks.

“What? I’m not your mother,” she says dryly. “How is she? Haven’t heard from her in awhile.” Grams shakes her head. “And people think I’m crazy.”

I snort a laugh.

“Have you heard from Dad?”

“No, sweetheart.” Her face softens. “At least your mom tries. I shouldn’t be so hard on her.”

“Don’t give her too much credit. We both know it’s you that’s provided for me.”

“I only want you to be happy.” She pats my leg.

“I’m happy when I’m here.”

“But you can’t stay here.”

My heart sinks.

“Not all the time at least. There is a whole world out there for you to see.”

“That does sound nice, but I don’t know what I want to see or do.” That makes me feel broken. Everyone else seems to have some sort of plan or direction. “I don’t fit anywhere.”

“The most interesting people I know don’t fit. You shouldn’t try so hard. Be you, and the rest will fall into place. And any pieces that don’t never belonged to begin with.”

I think there is something to what Grams is saying. With Rowan I have been myself. It’s only when I’m apart from him that I let my thoughts get away from me.

“Thanks, Grams.” I kiss her on the cheek. “I’m gonna go see what Rowan is up to.”

“Probably roaming around somewhere.” She shakes her head and starts swiping on TikTok again. “Men never see what they’ve been looking for even when you put it right in their face.”

I’m not sure what Grams means by that, but I know there has to be something to it. People might think she can be nutty at times, but she always knows what she’s doing.

My flashlight keeps trying to crap out on me as I climb into the top of the old stables. I've been meaning to take a look around up here for a while, but now seems to be the right time. Edith said the last handyman had stored the extra wall tiles up in this dusty attic.

It's probably good for me to let Charlie have some alone time, too. I feel like I've been all over her from the moment she got here. It wasn't my intention. But I can't help the way I'm drawn to her. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. Even now, I'm wondering if I'll see her at dinner.

"Get it together, Rowan," I grumble at myself and try to focus on the real reason I'm here: treasure.

I bang the flashlight against my thigh, and it brightens up. I train it on the wall and swing it around, getting a basic view of the space. It's small, but it's packed with random items. I don't see anything even close to wall tiles as I walk toward the first pile of junk. Old clothes, a rocking horse that looks haunted at best, possessed at worst, and some old moth-eaten coats.

My flashlight flickers as I go deeper, my eyes no longer looking for tiles. Instead, I'm looking for treasure. This would be a decent hiding spot for the diadem. Maybe it's tucked somewhere in the clutter.

I bang the flashlight again. It flickers brighter, and I pick through the old belongings, some of the clothes falling apart in my hands as I move in a semi-circle, peering at old photos and

knick-knacks. I wonder if even Edith has seen any of this stuff. The age on it is mind-blowing.

By the time I'm done, I've found a stack of wooden tiles in boxes but no hidden treasure. Sighing, I grab the boxes and turn, which is when my light goes out.

"Fuck."

I jump back when something moves at the top of the attic stairs.

"Hi." Charlie's sweet voice rolls over me.

"Hey, I didn't see you there."

"It's dark."

"My flashlight went out." I walk over to the pull-down. "What are you up to?"

She sneezes and climbs the rest of the way up. "Just wanted to tell you it's almost time for dinner."

That warms me all over. "Yeah, I was grabbing more tiles. Let's head back down."

"Um." She leans over and looks down the ladder. "Can you go first?"

"I guess. Why?"

"That way if I fall—"

"I'll catch you." I nod and heft the boxes up to my chest, then step carefully down the ladder to the ground. Once I put the boxes down, I smack the flashlight again, and it comes on. I train it up to the attic so she can see where she's stepping and hold the ladder with my other hand. "Come on. I've got you."

"Okay," she chirps.

She carefully puts one foot on the top step, then the other.

Then my mind turns to nothing but mush and static. Because, god-fucking-dammit, she's not wearing any panties.

No. Fucking. Panties.

In the glare of the flashlight, I see her pink skin, her slit, the fucking honeyhole that winks at me with each step she takes.

When she gets close, I drop the flashlight.

“Oh, are you—Oh!” She yelps when I grab her and turn her so she’s facing me. Her pussy is right in front of me, the only thing separating us the fabric of her skirt. “Rowan?”

“Bunny, you aren’t wearing panties.”

She puts her hands to her face. “Oh, you saw?”

“I saw.” I don’t even recognize my voice. It’s guttural, edged in broken glass.

“Well, I, um, I…”

I grip her skirt and lift it.

She gasps.

I still when her pussy is revealed, her perfect mound right in front of me. Leaning closer, I press my nose to it and inhale.

My cock is so hard I think it might explode, and no thought whispers in my mind. All I can see, hear, smell—is her. Her and her delicious cunt.

I press my lips to her mound, kissing it, then going lower and darting my tongue between her folds.

She jolts.

I grab one of her thighs and spread her, her cunt opening for me. I groan as I lick her as far back as I can reach and run my tongue along her flesh, stopping on the nub at the front.

“Rowan!” She grips my hair.

I take her other thigh and rest both of them over my shoulders, and then I dig in. I can’t fucking stop myself. Can’t do anything except devour her. I plunge my tongue inside her wet pussy, sucking and licking and swallowing her wetness. She tastes like musky sweetness, a perfect honey on my tongue as I eat her out.

She moves her hips, her clit grinding against me as I press my tongue inside her again and again, tasting more of her

sweetness and needing still more. When I pull out and focus on her clit, her thighs start to shake, her fingers yanking on my hair as she wraps tighter and tighter.

“Rowan!” she cries, her hips freezing.

I rub the broad side of my tongue against her clit faster and faster. And when I slide a finger inside her slick cunt, she cries out. My name is on her lips as she comes, as I lick up every bit of her juice and swallow it down, silently begging her for more. I can’t stop sucking her pink flesh, tasting and licking until I’m drunk on her.

“Rowan.” She presses her thighs against my head. “I can’t. I can’t. Please.” She squirms.

Unwillingly, I relinquish my prize and pull back.

“That was... That was so—”

“Delicious,” I finish for her and press another kiss to her soft mound.

I lower her to the ground, her round eyes staring up at me in the dark. “Let’s get to dinner.”

She blinks, batting her lashes. “Was that my punishment for earlier?” she asks.

I smirk and pull her to me. “No, that was my reward for not killing that guy at the hardware store.”

CHARLIE

I know Rowan needs to eat, but I don't love the idea that the taste of me is likely gone from his lips. I suppose I can put it back later. It might be fun to sneak off to his room in the middle of the night. Why does the idea of sneaking around sound so fun?

There are so many small things I missed out on when it came to my childhood: friends, boys, experiences. Honestly, I'm a bit surprised Grams had been so down with sending me off to boarding school and then college. It's really out of character for her.

Grams is more a free spirit, but she must have her heart set on me getting a degree. I might not be so opposed to the idea if it wasn't forced on me. If I hadn't been caged away for so long. Now all I want to do is break free. For all I know, if I got a real taste of life, I might return to college one day.

I've only been with Grams and Rowan a short time, and I already have a sense of being stronger. Both of them are pulling me back to the surface. I've retreated so much and isolated myself. It's been a way of getting by in school. One would think that after going to boarding school, I'd be better with people, but they made me feel odd. I quickly realized that I didn't fit in with the girls there. So instead of continuously trying to make friends, I learned it was easier to keep to myself.

Rowan doesn't make me feel that way. I think he likes me. Like *genuinely* likes me. I mean, he did give me a term of

endearment. I really need to think of one for him, but nothing has come to mind yet.

“Crème brûlée.” I perk up when the dessert is brought out. “Let me.” I take the two plates from Constance, not wanting her to get close to Rowan after what she did the last time. I place Rowan’s in front of him. Miss Perfect Boobs can keep them to herself. I know Rowan said he has no interest in her, but I still don’t want him getting a nice peek at them.

“Thanks.” Constance gives a small laugh, confused by my action.

Grams only smirks. “Tick tick tick, every night. The ghost at midnight.” She laughs to herself.

I can’t tell who she’s talking to or what she’s talking about, so I let it pass. That’s Grams.

“This is the second night you’ve joined for dinner.” Constance is practically purring. “You’re getting addicted to my food, Ro.”

“Ro?” I whisper under my breath. Did she give him a nickname before I did? I try to keep my face emotionless, but I’m terrible at it. My eyebrows are already pulling together, my lips pursing.

“Rowan,” he corrects her. *Well then.* I sit up a bit straighter, loving the fact that he corrected her. Again, I try to mask my smugness but likely fail.

“He wants to have dinner with me,” I say, admittedly like a dope.

“Can’t say I blame him, sweetie.” Constance gives me a warm smile.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. I don’t want to be a jerk. Still, it felt good to have pushed back. I never did that back at school with the other girls.

“Don’t be sorry. If Rowan is yours and you think another woman is coming for him, get those claws out. Nothing wrong with standing up for yourself.” That was the last thing I

thought she would say to me. “I’m a bit of a flirt. It’s my nature, but I can by all means flirt with you.” She winks at me.

“I never did anything like that, but I *did* go to an all girls school. There was some hooking up when the lights went out.”

“And here I thought I was paying for a school with a stick up its ass,” Grams chimes in.

“Believe me, the stick was there. I can promise you that.” I take a bite of my crème brûlée, letting out a small moan. “This is so good.”

“Glad you enjoy it, sweetie. I’m going to straighten the kitchen and head out.”

“Speaking of school. Your mother called me today. Or maybe it was tomorrow?” Grams pokes the crispy top of her dessert, her brow furrowing. “Last week? Hmmm.”

My stomach sinks.

“What did she have to say?” Did she bring up that I was supposed to be on spring break next week and going to visit her? Please, no.

“She mentioned the possibility of you switching schools to move back closer to her.”

“What?” I gape at her. “Why?” My mom never mentioned a thing to me about going to a different school. Once again, she’s trying to control everything in my life. It’s why this little slice of freedom I’m allowing myself is so important. Who knows when I’ll have a say in my choices again?

“Firstly, you’re an adult, Charlie. The Devereaux family pays for your education. I might not have had much pull when it came to which boarding school you attended, but college is different. If you want to switch, that’s fine with me, but I don’t want her forcing you to do it. It’s not up to her, and I want you to know that.”

“Thanks, Grams.” It’s sweet, but I don’t want to switch. I want to step back for a bit. I wonder how Grams would feel about that.

“But there is only one reason I can think of why your mother would be in a hurry to get you back home.”

“She’s gonna virgin bride me to some preacher’s son or something,” I half joke.

“What?” Rowan booms, making me jump. It doesn’t faze Grams.

“I’m not marrying anyone.”

“You haven’t even had your ho years yet. Of course you can’t marry anyone.” Leave it to my Grams; she never minces words. “Why, when I was your age, I was on my back all weekend. And if I didn’t have a man around, sometimes my fingers would get pruny from all the time I had them stuck up my—”

“Grams!” I gasp.

Rowan swipes a hand down his face.

“I’m only letting you know that your mom can’t play those games with you. I want to ask you something.”

“What?” Okay, now I’m busted.

“The bank card you have.”

“The one you gave me the other day?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You have a bank card. Your mother should have given it to you.”

“Yes, it’s for when I need small things. I have to ask when I want to use it.”

“You don’t have to do any such thing, Charlie. That card is yours. Not your mother’s.” Grams’ expression is tense. I know she and my mom don’t get along. Mom does a bit of ass kissing to try and stay on good terms because Grams is where the money comes from. My father might not send support, not that I’m aware of anyway, but Grams always has. “The account is in my name and yours. Joanna merely had a card to it. Would it bother you if I cut off her access?”

I sit there, not sure how to respond. “I don’t know,” I say honestly. “It’s not your job to support her or me.”

“You’re my only grandbaby,” Grams cuts in. “But yes, your mom draws a lot on the account. I’m guessing for that church of hers. I don’t think I care much for them.” That makes two of us. There is a weirdness when I’m around the church group. In prep school, we had to go to mass, but it was never anything like the ones at my mother’s church.

“I can’t tell you what to do, Grams.”

“Well, that might not be as true as you think.” She lets out a chuckle.

“What does that mean?”

“Some think I might be losing it.” She shoots a glance over to Rowan.

“You shoved yarn down the disposal,” he says dryly.

“Maybe I’m keeping you busy.” Grams smiles, then looks confused for a second. “When are you going to get the clock out of my wall?”

“I, uh.” Rowan’s dark brows draw together. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Good.” She smiles contentedly again. “Or maybe I’m crazy. If that’s the case, then it all falls to you, Charlie.” Grams swings her attention back to me. “Now that I’m seeing a bit of these games Joanna is playing, I want to make it clear to you that if it’s not me running the Devereaux estate, it’s you.”

“Are you sure you’re not crazy?”

“Time will tell.” Grams takes a bite of her dessert. Rowan leans back in his chair, not eating, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. I am, too, but mine aren’t focused on what Grams just laid on me. They’re on Rowan.

I love Grams’ home. It’s the one place that gives me a sense of truly belonging. I’m sure she’s loaded too, but I don’t want to think about those things. Grams isn’t going anywhere. Crazy or not. But if I was asked if I could only take one thing from here, it would be Rowan. Unfortunately, I don’t think he comes with the house.

When we finish dessert, I hop up from my chair. “Rowan, I can walk you back to your place.”

He turns his head, cocking his ear toward the back door. “Someone’s here.”

“What?” I go to the window over the kitchen sink and look outside.

“Oh.” Grams licks her spoon clean. “I forgot to mention that I told Joanna you were enjoying your stay here.”

All the blood drains from my face. “What?”

“Yep.” She grins. “She may have said she was coming to visit and bringing a Mr. Brunson. Do we know a Brunson? What’s a Brunson?” She giggles. “See, now I’ve said it too much, and it has no meaning. Brunson, Brunson, Brunson.”

A hard knock sounds at the door, and I swear my knees would’ve given out at the sound if Rowan hadn’t grabbed my elbow.

“You all right?”

I look up at him and slowly, decisively shake my head. No, absolutely *nothing* is all right.

“Edith, Charlie?” A woman’s high, reedy voice comes through the front door.

“I forgot how much I can’t stand to hear that woman talk.” Edith grabs her walker and stands. “Oh, dear me, look at the clock.” She looks at the kitchen sink. “It’s long past time for me to play my annual game of patty-cake with Dudley. I should go do that.” She hurries off pretty spryly despite the walker. “Kisses, Charlie,” she calls as she disappears down the hallway.

I sit Charlie at the table. “Are you all right?”

“I, um, I—”

“Hello?” The knocking turns into banging. “Charlie, I know you’re in there! Edith, it’s me, Joanna!”

“Don’t worry.” I kiss her forehead. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “No it isn’t. If she knows I’m here, then she knows I’ve been lying to her.”

“Hey.” I cup her cheeks. “I won’t let anything happen to you, okay? I don’t know why you’ve been lying, but I know you, and I know it must be for a good reason. I’ve got your back.”

Her eyes widen, and she takes my hand. “You mean it?”

“Yes.” I kiss her forehead again, then stride to the door, yanking it open so the goddamn banging will stop. “Can I help you?” I bark.

The woman blinks up at me. By her side is a young man, his blond hair super gelled down to his head and his khakis pulled up too high. He can't be much past 20, and I doubt he even shaves.

"Who are you?" the woman—Joanna—snips.

"Rowan." I glare down my nose at her. "I'm the caretaker here."

"The help?" She rolls her eyes and sweeps past me, pulling the boy with her.

"Mom." Charlie's voice is weak, and she still sits at the table.

"I should've known you were up to no good when you weren't responding quickly enough to my messages. Then I decided to check up on you, and guess what I learned?"

"I don't—"

"That spring break is this week. Right now!" Her voice rises in pitch.

"I know."

"Why would you lie? What's going on? Are you failing? I know you aren't the brightest, but I thought—"

"Hey." I step between the screeching banshee and my Charlie. "Don't talk to her like that."

"Excuse me?" Joanna puts her hands on her hips.

"You heard me, lady. I don't want you talking to Charlie like that. Keep it up, and I'll boot you and Poindexter here right off this fucking property." I step toward her.

"How dare you! Don't you know who I am?"

"I do, and I don't give a shit. You need to check your tone."

"Rowan." Charlie stands. "It's all right. It's just her way."

"I don't give a good goddamn what her way is. I'm not letting her talk to you like that." I keep my position between them.

Joanna sputters, her face turning red.

Charlie comes to my side and touches my elbow. “Really, it’s okay.”

I wholeheartedly disagree, but I don’t interfere. She’s standing on her own two feet, and I’m not going anywhere.

“Mom, I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid you’d react ... badly.” Charlie tangles her fingers together in front of her. “I’ve been thinking about taking some time off from school so I can—”

“Absolutely not.”

I bristle at the woman trying to steamroll my girl, but Charlie squeezes my elbow. Despite my anger, I stay silent. If she wants to fight this battle, I have to let her, but I’m true to my word. I’ll always have her back.

“Just listen, okay? I don’t know if school is right for me right now. Maybe later when I know what I want to do. But I haven’t seen enough of the world to know that yet.”

“As I suspected.” The boy gives Joanna a dark look. “I’m glad we’re here. This is the right time.”

Joanna turns to him. “You think?”

He nods. “Before the world taints her further. This is a good thing. She has no business in school anyway. The teachings of our Lord make clear that her place is as a helpmate, someone to raise children and keep a warm home for her husband.”

“Don’t talk about her like she’s not here, dickhead.” I step toward him.

“Rowan.” Charlie wraps her hands around my bicep.

The boy watches her movement, his eyes narrowing. I want to pound the prick into a fine pink mist.

Joanna gasps and reaches for Charlie. “Get away from him. He’s the help!”

“Mom, this is Rowan. He’s my-my, my um—”

“I’m her boyfriend.” I wrap my arm around her waist.

Joanna’s mouth falls open.

“It’s worse than I thought.” The boy’s lips form an even thinner line. “Joanna, with me.” He turns on his heel and stomps into the sitting room. “We need to pray. Now.”

“Don’t you move. We’re not done here.” Joanna points at Charlie, then follows the twatty boy as if he has her on a leash.

When I turn to Charlie, she’s looking up at me, her cheeks pink and her eyes warm. “Your girlfriend?”

I smirk. “Does that bother you?”

“No.” She shakes her head slowly. “It ... it makes me happy.” She smiles big.

“Good, let’s go.” I take her hand.

“I can’t. Mom said for me to—”

“She’s busy with Opie the dipshit right now. Come on. I want you to tell me what’s going on and what your plan is. You aren’t going to do anything you don’t want to, and that includes going back to school.” I pull her toward the back door.

She hesitates, biting down on her lip.

I lean closer to her and kiss her, claiming her lips for my own. She sighs and wraps her arms around my neck. It feels so right, so fucking perfect. I’m addicted to her.

And isn’t that a fucking problem? I came here for the diadem. But I’ve found myself obsessed with a different treasure entirely. And now I have even more Devereauxs underfoot. How can I search and help Charlie at the same time? The simple answer is, I can’t. I have to choose.

“**S**he’s going to come looking for me.” I glance over my shoulder as Rowan pulls me along. His giant hand has mine engulfed. The man is a beast. I’m not sure what other girls dream about, but for me it’s always been the beast. I hated the part in the book where the Beast turned back into the charming shiny prince. No, thank you.

“You really think she’ll look for you out here?” Rowan leads me into his place. The door shuts behind us before the sound of the lock clicks into place. “You can spend hours searching this property and still not find every damn room.”

“True.” I turn to face him.

Rowan is leaning up against the door. It should be illegal how damn hot he looks right now.

Does he think I’m going to try and make a run for it? Is that why he’s blocking the doorway? I thought we’ve established I’m a clinger when it comes to him. I’m a tad possessive too, because I wanted to claw my mom’s eyes out when I saw her reaction to seeing Rowan.

I’m pretty positive she was eyeing him up. Which is insane because my mother might as well be a nun with how she lives her life now. I’ve never even known her to date anyone. I still find it hard to believe she conceived me.

“Out with it, Bunny.” Rowan breaks me from my thoughts. “I want to know what little plan you have in that pretty head of yours.”

“You think I’m pretty?” I know he said other words in that sentence, but the fact that he called me pretty is the only thing I care about at this moment.

“I think we’ve established that I can’t keep my hands or mouth off you.” He folds his arms over his chest, not moving from in front of the door.

“Well, since you’re my boyfriend, your hands and mouth should be all over me.” I let myself float in the happy bubble.

“Bunny,” Rowan warns, reminding me that he asked me a question earlier.

“Is that your ‘tell me or I’ll spank you’ voice because if it is then I might not tell you,” I tease. Quicker than a man his size should be able to move, Rowan is on me. My feet leave the floor almost as quickly as my back hits the bed. “You’re fast.”

“Out with it.” He looms over me.

“It’s nothing really.” I chew on my bottom lip.

“I need to know how many bunny traps I’ll need to set around here so you don’t go hopping off.”

I wrap my arms and legs around him. He asked for it. I mean, I was trying to be low-key clingy, but obviously he wants the full effect.

“The last thing I want to do is get away from you.” I lean up to brush my mouth against his.

“Bunny,” he groans as his control slips. His mouth claims mine, pressing me down harder into the bed. “Swear you’re not going to run off on me.”

“I swear.”

Rowan’s mouth travels down my throat. “I’ll snap that fucker’s neck if he talks about marrying you again.” Rowan takes his anger out on my shirt, ripping it from my body.

“There is something wrong with me.”

Rowan’s head snaps up. “What? Did I grab you too hard? Fuck, I forgot how small you are.”

“I’m not small.” I laugh. Though when I’m under him, I do feel tiny.

“What’s wrong with you?” His hands start to roam over my body.

“I just meant I’m getting all turned on while you’re talking about murder and being jealous. My mother would be so ashamed, but in all seriousness, if you are going to kill someone, maybe we should get married first because of conjugal visits.”

Rowan slowly lifts his head, his eyes meeting mine. I went too far. Now he really knows my crazy. I laid it all out there for him. “I’m joking?”

“You’re a terrible liar.” He goes for my bra next.

“I know. That’s why I text my lies.” Rowan’s mouth wraps around my nipple, causing me to moan his name.

“You don’t lie to me. Ever.” He switches breasts, giving the other the same attention.

“Never.” He could get me to agree to anything right now. The throb between my legs is growing by the second. His mouth moves lower, traveling down my body. Rowan strips me of the rest of my clothes, pulling off his own too.

“This is an altar I’ll worship at and pray to day and night for the rest of my life.” His mouth descends on me. He wasn’t lying. His mouth worships me over and over until I can’t take another second of the pleasure and have to beg him to stop.

“Please.” I grip the sheets in a tight hold as the second orgasm floods my body. Rowan pumps two of his thick fingers in and out of me. “I need you inside me.”

“I am inside you.” He kisses my sensitive clit, making my whole body jerk.

“If you take my virginity then maybe they’ll give up.”

A dark expression takes over Rowan’s face. His fingers slip out of me. He crawls back on top of me.

“I promise you, I could fuck you right in front of that little shit. Come inside of you, and that motherfucker would still beg to eat your pussy after if only to get a taste of you.”

“Rowan!” I gasp.

“Not that I’d ever let him or anyone else see you this way, let alone taste you.” The head of Rowan’s cock slips through my wet folds. “I’ll greedily take your virginity, Bunny, but I don’t need it. All I need is you.” He thrusts forward, giving me every hard inch of him.

A whimper rips from me. I don’t know if it’s from pain or pleasure. Probably a mix of both. So many emotions and feelings roll through my body. Never in my life had I imagined it would feel like this. That I would be so connected to another human being.

“You with me?” Rowan presses a kiss gently to my lips. I part them for him, letting myself get lost in his kiss. His words sink deeper into me.

“I’m with you.” I wrap my legs around him. Rowan pulls out slowly, then thrusts all the way back in. “Rowan.” He’s everywhere. No part of me is untouched by him. “Take me,” I say against his mouth, knowing he’s holding back.

“Bunny,” he warns, but it only spurs me on. “So fucking tight,” he grits out.

“I want to feel you come inside me.” I lift my hips to meet his thrusts.

“Then make me,” he growls against my mouth. I slip my hand between us, my fingers going to my clit. Rowan pushes harder, his cock hitting deep. “Come for me, Bunny. Lock your greedy pussy around me and suck every drop from me.”

“Rowan!” This time I scream his name. The orgasm hits me hard. This one is different from the others. He grunts, thrusting two more times before pushing as deep as he can.

He groans my name into my neck. My sex flutters around his cock when warmth blooms inside of me. He’s right. I *am* greedy for him. I tighten my legs around him, not wanting him to go anywhere.

“You have a very dirty mouth,” I whisper. Rowan’s cock jerks inside of me. I swear I feel him come more.

“You have a very greedy pussy.”

“I think you’re right.” I can’t deny it. I still want more. Rowan rolls over, taking me with him so I’m now on top.

“I know I am.” He grips my hips and lifts me a few inches before pulling me back down. “I can see it for myself.” Roman repeats the action, sliding me up and down as he watches his cock slip in and out of me. I feel some of his cum spill free. “And I’ll make sure it stays that way.”

I want to make him promise, but the words get caught in my throat. Only moans escape. I just pray he doesn’t change his mind.

*H*er skin is beautiful in the golden morning light, her lashes resting against her cheek. How did I ever manage to bag such a gorgeous woman? I don't know, but I'm never letting her go.

I wore her out last night, giving her so many orgasms she begged me to stop. I didn't ... at least not right away.

I drop a gentle kiss on her forehead, then ease out of bed, pull on some boxer briefs, and quietly go to the kitchen. Coffee's already brewing thanks to the automatic setting, and I pull out some eggs and bacon.

Before long, the small cottage smells like breakfast, and the rooster at the far back of the property is letting everyone know it's time to get up. I plate the eggs, bacon, and buttered toast, then take it back to my bedroom.

Charlie watches me, a smile playing across her lips as I sit beside her. "Hungry?"

"Starving." She scoots up in the bed, the sheet wrapped around her.

"Then you're in luck." I put a napkin on her lap, then her plate. After handing her the cup of coffee, I load up her toast with eggs and bacon.

"Mmm. You made it just the way I like. Too much cream and extra sugar." She blows on the coffee then takes another drink. "So good."

“I figured you wanted it just as sweet as you are.” I hold the loaded toast to her mouth, and she takes a bite.

A little moan rises in her throat as she chews.

“You like it?”

She nods.

I feed her until the toast is gone. “Want more? I have plenty.” I stand, and she grabs my wrist.

“I’m stuffed. How about you?”

“I taste as I go.” I sit down and put the plate on the bedside table, then kiss her.

She parts her lips for me, her tongue dancing with mine until I pull back to give her air. My gaze strays down her body, her nipples hard against the sheet.

“Come to think of it, you look good enough to eat.” I kiss her again, pulling her to me, the sheet falling to her lap.

When her hard nipples press against my chest, I groan and slide my hands lower, cupping her warm ass.

A knock at my front door brings a growl from me.

She turns her head. “Who is it?”

I kiss her throat, tonguing her sweet skin then dropping lower and sucking on one of her hard nipples.

“Mmm.” She runs her fingers through my hair.

The knock comes again, louder this time.

“They can wait.” I drag her down in the bed and suck her other nipple, her hands roving my shoulders.

“Charlie!” A shrill voice.

Charlie gasps. “Oh, no. It’s my mom.”

She pushes at my shoulders as I nibble on her breast.

“She can wait.”

“Charlie, come out here right now! I know you’re in there!”

I slide my hand to her front and press my thumb to her clit.

“Rowan!” Charlie moans as I stroke it in tight circles. “I can’t ... My mom ...”

Returning to her mouth, I kiss her hard and sink two fingers inside her. Fuck, she’s so warm, her body responding to mine perfectly. When I pull out her wetness and stroke her clit again, her hips rock against me.

“You are being very disrespectful to your mother!” It’s the dipshit from last night. Has to be.

I growl and tongue Charlie deeper, my fingers playing her clit as she arches, her body begging me for more. With a smooth movement, I’m between her legs, and I pull my boxer briefs down.

I run my cock between her folds and slide inside her, a groan ripping from me at how goddamn perfect her slick cunt is.

“We can’t.” Charlie looks up at me, her eyes glazed with lust.

“You can, and you will.” I flip over, seating her on top of me. “Ride my cock. I want to see you come all over it.”

She moans, and I cup her tits as she throws her head back, her hips moving slowly at first, then speeding up as the assholes outside the front door talk loudly between themselves.

“I can break it down,” the twat says.

I pinch Charlie’s nipples.

She moans, the sound heavenly. And loud.

“What was that?” Her mother’s sharp question.

“That’s it. Be my little slut. Only mine, Bunny. Are you a whore for me?”

She gasps, her hands tangling in her hair as she piles it on top of her head. “You’re so filthy.”

“Tell me you’re my slut.” I press my thumb on her clit, my cock throbbing as she rides it, her body rocking as she chases her pleasure.

“I’m your slut.”

“Louder.” I stroke her faster, her thighs shaking as she rides me. “Tell me, Bunny. Tell me, then come all over my cock.”

She bears down on me, grinding her clit as she throws her head back. “I’m your slut!”

“Jezebel!” her mother screeches.

“This is an affront to the lord our God. Get on your knees, Joanna. We must pray. Our Father, who—”

I grin up at her, at the fucking sexy goddess working my cock. “That’s my good girl. My perfect little whore.”

“Rowan!”

I feel her pussy clamp down on me, and I can’t wait another second. I let my release wash over me, groaning at the pure fucking ecstasy as I shoot my load inside her hot cunt.

She moans my name, the sound pure sex as she grinds out every last bit of pleasure on me, my cock kicking as I flood her.

When she takes a breath and drops to my chest, I stroke her back.

“I’m not leaving until you come out here!” her mother bellows.

Charlie shakes, and for a moment, I worry that she’s crying. But then the sweet sound of her laughter washes over me.

I kiss her crown, then pull her up my body, my cock slipping free, and I kiss her, swallowing the adorable sounds of her laughter as we both come down from our high. Though I don’t think I’ll ever come down from her. She’s an addiction I never want to kick.

CHARLIE

*A*t some point I'm going to have to face the firing squad. "She can be relentless," I let Rowan know. I wasn't great at making friends at school, but it definitely didn't help when my mother would show up there. After her visits, everyone would talk about how strange she was. "I'm not sure you realize the crazy that comes with me, and I don't only mean myself." I know I'm odd. The right things don't always come out of my mouth. But my mom makes me look like a darn saint with how whacky she can be.

"You're the least crazy person I've ever known, Bunny." He's only trying to be nice. I bet he's in a sex fog too. That has to be it. Otherwise, I'd be really freaking out since my mom heard me having sex. And the fact that Rowan was screaming that I was his whore. God, that was so hot. I want to be his slut. To have him whisper all those dirty things in my ear like a prayer.

"You sure? I mean I have Grams' DNA and my mother's," I point out.

"I promise. In fact, you're the purest, most honest creature I've ever met." His words make me want to melt into a puddle.

"I'm kinda here on a lie," I point out.

"Maybe so, but you did what you had to before that woman ruined you." He glares toward the door. My mom has stopped banging on it, but I know she's still out there. I wonder if she's at the door kneeling and praying for my sins.

All her efforts are for nothing. The last time I ended up on my knees was when I was in trouble and Rowan was thrusting his cock into my mouth.

“I think you ruined me,” I tease.

He rolls, pinning me under him. “You’re mine to ruin, are you not?”

“Yes.” I wrap my legs around him. I want him to ruin me over and over.

“Charlie!” The banging starts again, my mother’s screams interrupting us.

“I need to face her, but you ripped my shirt.”

“You can wear one of mine.” He kisses me before rolling off me. I watch as Rowan strolls from the bed naked. His ass is even muscled. I prop myself up on my elbow, taking in every inch of him.

This is the happiest I’ve been in my life. I never belong, but Rowan doesn’t mind my strange quirks. Or that I blurt out whatever is on my mind. Oftentimes, I can make more of a mess of things than help. None of that bothers him. It always earns me one of his rare smirks that I notice only I get.

“This work?” Rowan comes back fully dressed and hands me a flannel. I take it from him and start to put it on. “Bra. You’re not going out there with Charlie Brown and no bra on.”

“Who is Charlie Brown?” It sounds vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it.

“Fuck me. I really am a cradle robber.” He shakes his head but doesn’t sound upset about it. I don’t see regret in his eyes, thankfully.

“You robbed my virginity!” I laugh at my own joke. Rowan doesn’t think it’s as funny as I do. I put my bra on and then the flannel. I’ve not seen him wear a flannel since I got here. “Where did this come from? Do you chop wood?” He gives me a perplexed expression. “You’re supposed to chop wood in a shirt like this. Leave it all unbuttoned and grunt while you whack the wood. That’s what the men on TikTok do.”

“They film themselves chopping wood?” I nod. “Why?”

“It’s like female porn, I think.”

“No more TikTok,” he orders.

“Your grunts are better.” I let out a sigh. “Almost as good as that dirty mouth of yours.”

“No more TikTok,” he grunts again.

“Fine, but don’t be using those grunts to get what you want.”

“I’ll do what I have to.”

“Okay, I give. But at some point you have to chop wood in the shirt,” I tease.

“I’ll whack your ass with my wood. How about that?”

I burst into giggles. They die on my lips when my mom starts banging on the door again.

“Her hand has to be hurting by now.” I roll off the bed.

“Panties.” I expect him to hand them to me, but he leans down so that I can step into them. Then he buttons the shirt for me. My eyes start to burn. “Bunny.” Rowan cups my cheek in his big, rough palm. I tilt my head to lean into it. “She’s not taking you from here.”

I nod.

That’s not why I have the urge to cry. It’s because of the way he takes care of me. He knows what I need and crave. His mere touch comforts me. It’s strange to have known him for such a short time but to be so connected to him. Is this possible or am I being naïve?

I love the fact that he’s not cowering to my mother and her demands. I know he’s bothered by her, but she’ll grate on anyone’s nerves. Hell, my own father ran from her, and I can’t fault him. He’s a free spirit. I think he tried to stay as long as he could, but in the end, he did what he had to. It just sucks he didn’t take me with him.

There has to be something wrong with me, though. How come I can never make friends? I never fit with others. Rowan and

Grams are the exception to the rule. Maybe it's because I'm still new to Rowan. Who knows, with time, how that might change for him. That line of thinking allows my insecurities to creep in.

"I'm going to call the cops. This is kidnapping!" Another bang comes from the door.

"I can tell her to fuck off," Rowan offers.

"She's still my mom." I hate that I'm sticking up for her in any way, because she would never do the same for me. But I'm not her, and I never want to be.

"Doesn't mean shit. People don't get passes to treat you like they own you because they share your blood." He leans down, his mouth brushing mine. "You have to earn that right." A spark flutters inside me. Is he saying that I own him? I know he owns me, and that's not scary at all. Unless he ever decided to leave me. He'd take a part of me with him that I don't think I could get back.

"Let's get this over with." Rowan snags my hand as I head toward the door. He stays by my side as I flip the lock and pull it open. My mother's eyes widen when she gets a good look at me.

"Charlie." She puts her hand to her chest. "What have you done?"

"Sins can be forgiven," the boy with my mom says from beside her. "It's not too late for her. She'll repent, and I'll cleanse her." I don't miss the way he's looking at me.

"Check her legs out again, and I'll pluck your eyes out of your fucking skull, Opie."

My mom gasps.

"And trust me, you'll never be able to cleanse her from the things I did to her body." Rowan wraps his arm around me from behind, pulling me into him so my back meets his chest.

I want to smack him and kiss him at the same time. That was the worst and best thing he could say.

“Jacob would never succumb to the flesh. He’s a man of God. Unlike some other people.” My mom turns to Jacob. “I think this is a test. We mustn’t fail. God never gives us more than we can handle, right?” she pleads with Jacob. “Her soul and salvation lies in our hands.”

For all my mother talks about saving souls, she sure has a way of wearing mine down.

“*I* need to speak to my daughter.” Joanna glares at me.
“*Alone.*”

“I don’t give a shit. If Charlie wants me here, I stay here.” I hold her tighter, her warm body pressed to mine.

Opie—or I suppose, Jacob—gives me a narrow glare. “You may have sullied her, but—”

“Don’t you *ever* use that fucking word to describe Charlie.” My hand fists, my knuckles aching to do some work on this asshole’s face.

He pales and steps back. “She can be forgiven,” he mumbles.

“Rowan.” Charlie turns and looks up at me, her beautiful eyes full of so much trust. Trust for *me*. “I’ll talk with Mom for a little while, okay?”

“I don’t like it.”

“I know, but I won’t be going anywhere. I’ll be right here.” She puts her hand on my chest, and her mother groans. “I just need to set some boundaries.” She swallows hard. “For once.” She gets onto her tiptoes and whispers, “I need to tell her that I’m staying here. For good. Or at least until I figure out what I want to do.”

I hold her tighter. “I don’t like it.”

“I know, but I have to do it. It’s time.” She drops back onto her flat feet.

I grind my teeth. I don't want to leave her with her mother and the prick, but I can't tell Charlie no, either. Not when she asks me like this, not when she needs me to trust her. Fuck.

"All right, but I expect you to join me when you're done. We have lots of work to do around here today. I'll be upstairs in Edith's room removing a clock from her wall."

She giggles. "Oh, Grams. Wait!" A smile brightens her face. "Am I like, your apprentice or something?"

"Absolutely." I lean down and kiss her, bending her back so she holds on to me as our tongues dance.

Her mother spins, putting her back to us, but Jacob watches, his sneer growing by the second.

When I finally let her up, she takes a deep breath and looks at me with hazy eyes. "Don't worry, boss. I'll be right along to work once I'm done here."

"You better." I squeeze her ass. "If I have to wait too long, I'll need to discipline you."

She bites her lip. "Extra work?"

"Extra work on your knees." I smirk down at her.

Her mother groans again and makes the sign of the cross.

"I'll keep that in mind. I sure hope I don't get lost on my way to you and end up being late. That would be terrible."

I kiss her again, rough and quick. "Get to it then, Bunny."

She turns to her mother as I walk past, deliberately shoulder-checking Jacob. He stumbles backwards and lands on his ass on the gravel path in front of my cottage. I keep going as he complains.

Once I reach the porch to the big house, I stop and lean against one of the posts, my gaze on Charlie. She has her arms crossed in front of her, her shoulders back, and her head high as her mother runs off at the mouth. I can't hear what she's saying, but I'm certain it isn't pleasant. I itch to return to Charlie's side and tell her mother exactly where she can stick it, but I won't. Not when Charlie wants to stand on her own. I have to

turn and leave before I go over there anyway, because just watching it makes anger simmer in my gut.

“Morning, Edith,” I call as I walk in.

“I want you to look into installing a pole in here.” She’s in the sitting room staring at the ceiling.

“A pole?”

“Yeah, I want to take lessons.”

It dawns on me what she’s asking. “You mean a *stripper* pole?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She laughs.

“Oh.” I let out a relieved breath. “I was worried you—”

“What other kind of pole is there? Of *course* a stripper pole!” She wiggles her hips in her recliner. “I may not be able to run around these days, but I can certainly spread my legs and twirl around a pole.”

The mental image of that tries to creep in—Edith in her muumuu, stuck upside-down on the pole—but I smack it away like an NBA All-Star dunking a ball.

“I’ll put that on the list.” I head to the stairs. “Today, I’m going to find the clock in your wall.”

“You sure about that?” She pins me with her gaze.

“What do you mean?”

She looks away, the batty expression back on her face. “Oh, nothing.”

I stand at the bottom of the stairs for a while, just watching her. She picks up some embroidery and starts humming WAP to herself as she moves the needle through the fabric.

Sometimes—not often—but sometimes, I think Edith may not be crazy at all. Or if she is, she’s crazy like a fox.

I climb the stairs and trudge to her bedroom. Her windows look out on the side yard, so I can’t get a view of Charlie from here, but I *can* hear the screechy sounds of Joanna’s voice. She’s been talking for at least five minutes straight by this

point. It doesn't matter. I know Charlie's made up her mind. She may not know what she wants to do, but she knows it isn't going back to that school. I can't help but smile as I think of her working here as my helper. But the smile fades when I remember why I'm really here. It's not to help Edith fix up this old place. It's to rob her. Charlie was worried about coming here under false pretenses, but really I'm the one with dark motives and a repertoire of lies I've used again and again.

Sighing, I realize I have to come clean with her. Sooner rather than later. But I want her to know that I'll give up the search for the diadem if that means she can forgive me. That bauble is nothing compared to her. That thought warms me a little as I walk around Edith's room and peer at her walls.

I've searched this room several times, never finding anything that even suggests a safe or a secret hiding spot. Then again, I never heard a ticking in the walls either—and that's the thing with Edith: I don't know if *she* really hears it.

I start with the wall beside her window, knocking up and down it. It's empty, the studs placed at the correct intervals. I continue on the wall behind her headboard. Same situation. Then I knock along the wall where the entry door is, taking care to inspect from floor to ceiling by standing on a chair as I make my way around.

"Nothing here, Edith," I grumble as I move to the final wall and knock along the bottom between the closet and the bathroom. Then I climb on the chair and knock the middle section before moving to the top.

I keep going, my knuckles getting a little sore from the repeated tapping on the old plaster, but then I stop.

"Was that..." I peer at the wall above the closet door. It sounded different. Could be a misplaced stud.

I drop from the chair and walk into the closet to look up. There's a shelf along that part of the wall on this side, hat boxes and dusty old clothes stacked in piles. Reaching up, I push it all aside and fucking stare.

Where the wall should be smooth, it isn't. There's an outline of a narrow rectangle, one that protrudes slightly from the wall. Beneath the boxes and the clothes, it was impossible to see. And when I checked the rooms earlier, I may have used the studfinder just a fraction of an inch to the left or right, and I would've missed it.

My hands go cold, my heart pounding. Is this it? And why the fuck does it tick at midnight?

I step out of the closet and look up at the wall again. It's smooth on this side, nothing to give the hidden compartment away. Something else niggles at the back of my mind. Something important. But what?

I'm all out of fucking sorts, my mind racing at the discovery.

Then it hits me.

It's quiet.

Too fucking quiet.

I don't hear Joanna anymore.

"Charlie?" I yell as I bolt from the room and down the stairs. By the time I reach the porch, Joanna's car is tearing away down the lane.

CHARLIE

*M*y stomach rolls. The urge to throw up is overwhelming. My brain is foggy. Everything feels as though it's in slow motion. Slowly I try to push myself up, needing to find a bathroom before I vomit, but my hands aren't cooperating. I wiggle my fingers, trying to get some feeling back into them.

"She's waking up." I hear a voice, but it sounds far away.

"Thank God! I thought you used too much. Charlie, open your eyes," my mother snaps. I would know her voice anywhere.

"Stop yelling." I start to roll over but stop when I realize there is nowhere to roll without falling off the side of whatever I'm on. My eyes fly open. I'm lying in the backseat of a car. My mother is staring at me from the front passenger seat. "What's going on?" I try to sit up again and realize my hands are taped together in front of me.

"I'm saving you. That's what's going on." The weird, lingering sweet taste on my tongue triggers the memory of what happened. Jacob had put a cloth over my mouth. I fought him as best as I could. I remember scratching at him as I tried to scream, but it only made me breathe in more of whatever substance was on the cloth he used. The last thing I remember is my mother grabbing my hands to stop me from fighting before everything went black.

"This is kidnapping." I know my mother is nutty, but this is beyond insane.

“You’re my daughter. You’re my *kid*. It can’t be kidnapping. You’ll thank me eventually.”

“You’re adultnapping me then!” I correct. I’m not a child anymore. She can’t tell me what to do. Now that I think about it, I bet that’s what has sent her into this spiral. She’s realized that she doesn’t have control over me anymore, and she’s trying to reassert that power.

“Don’t be dramatic.” She rolls her eyes at me. I hate that word. Anytime I pushed back against something she’d demanded, I’d be called dramatic. Over time, I stopped pushing. I didn’t want to be known as that. Now I know it’s not me that’s dramatic. It’s her.

“Dramatic!” I scream. “You drugged me and tied my hands.”

“You assaulted Jacob.” I glance to the rearview mirror to see Jacob’s face. My nail marks streak across his cheek, one lightly bleeding. I can’t help but feel a sense of pride, knowing that I stood up for myself.

“Yeah, he assaulted me first.”

“Saved you,” my mother corrects.

“You’ve really lost it.”

“I’ve lost it? Me?! You’re being a harlot. Fornicating with a man you’re not married to. You’ll end up pregnant, and your life will be ruined. Trust me. I know!” Her words might as well be a smack to the face. Not because I’m scared of getting pregnant. Which could be a possibility. I hadn’t really thought of that until now.

“So you’re saying that I ruined your life?”

“She didn’t mean it that way. Every child is a gift from God.”

My mother nods adamantly in agreement with the boy half her age.

“My sin will be turned into a legacy. You’ll marry Prophet Jacob.”

“I’m not marrying him.”

“You will,” she snaps. “You should be thanking me. You will be his first wife. Bear his offspring.”

“His first?” I scrunch my nose. “I’m not into menages.”

“Charlie,” my mother hisses. “What is wrong with you? Where did you learn these words? It’s disgusting. Of course you wouldn’t be intimate with his other wife. You’re my daughter. I could never think of you in that way. It would be wrong.” It takes me a second to process what she said. Maybe whatever was on the cloth got me high, because I’m surely misunderstanding her. Because if I’m not, then she is in way deeper than I could’ve ever imagined.

“Are you stating I’m your daughter, which we all know, or are you saying you’re going to be his second wife?”

“Jacob and I are spiritually connected.” She reaches out and touches him. “But you will be his legal wife and bear his children.”

A lightbulb flickers on in my mind. “Oh, gross. You’ve slept with him, haven’t you?” There are no words for how twisted this is. Funny how she’s calling me a harlot when she’s a damn cougar who wants to share a man with her daughter. Gross.

“Charlie, that is enough.”

“Why do I have to marry him? You marry him. You’re already fucking him.”

My mother suddenly reaches back and smacks me. “I told you to watch your tongue.”

The smack doesn’t hurt. It’s shocking more than anything. All of this is.

“Mom, please. I’m spiritually connected to Rowan.” I try to reason with her using her insane logic.

“That man is using you, Charlie. Don’t be naïve.”

“He is not. I bet he could get laid anywhere. I saw you eyeing him up.”

“Joanna?” Jacob glances over at my mother. “Is that true?” How is he jealous? He’s trying to have two wives. What a

bunch of bull.

“Jacob, you know it’s only you for me.” She strokes his cheek with her finger while shooting me a glare. “He is using you for money. The man is a handyman. He’s the hired help who sees a golden opportunity to be set for life.”

What’s wrong with being a handyman? I’ve never seen my mom work a day in her life. I love Rowan’s hands. They are rather handy.

“He may be more than that if my research is correct.” Jacob glances at me in the rearview.

“What?” my mother asks. “What does that mean?”

“Never you mind about it.” He sounds irritated.

“Look, I don’t have any money. No matter what he is, he’s obviously not using me to get rich.”

“See? Naïve.” Mom scoffs. “If something were to happen to your grandmother, you would be very wealthy. You have to know she’s leaving everything to you.”

Rowan isn’t like that. He doesn’t care about money. Nothing about him has made me think that. “Nothing is going to happen to Grams.”

“She’s old, and accidents happen, but that’s for another day. Today, you need to marry Jacob.” An evil smile crosses my mother’s face that sends a chill through my body.

There is no way she would kill Grams. Would she? I wouldn’t give her a dime. Oh, God. My heart lodges in my throat. She drugged and kidnapped me. I don’t think there is a limit for my mother at this point. Not when it comes to this. It’s safe to assume the woman is in a cult. That she will stoop to any level for them.

“You’re going to have to kill me too.” That might be better than being trapped in a forced marriage with my mother and Jacob.

“I wouldn’t kill you, Charlie. You’re my daughter. Stop with the dramatics. Jacob wants children. I promised him.” She strokes his cheek again. This time, he smacks her hand away.

“You’ll be an obedient wife,” Jacob confirms.

“I won’t marry you. You can’t force me.”

“You’ll be surprised what my father and his church are capable of.” Jacob sits up straighter. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Charlie.” There is no missing the threat laced into his words.

Tears spill down my cheeks. What if I can’t get away? Grams can’t come for me. Would Rowan chase after me?

Jacob turns down a lane that sweeps over some rolling hills and disappears past a tree line. I follow, keeping my distance so I don't spook him into doing anything stupid. Charlie is in that car.

He doesn't notice me at all as I turn in behind him, his car disappearing over the first hill in front of me. We've been driving for almost an hour, long past the town where Edith lives, through a bigger city, and back out into a more rural area. There's nothing out here except cows and churches, so I'm not sure where the hell Jacob thinks he's taking Charlie, but it doesn't matter. He won't have her for long. And if she's hurt by the time I get to her? I hold the steering wheel in a death grip.

Creeping over the hill, I see Jacob cruising over the next one. He's picking up speed.

I unlock my phone and click on my maps app to figure out what the hell could be out here. The area is blank, just farmland, acres of grass and a strip of woods to separate fields. What the fuck are they doing out here? I try to search the coordinates, but my signal isn't strong enough. I'm going in blind.

He keeps going, all the way until he reaches a large metal building that has the looks of a huge barn. But all the sides are enclosed, and a cross hangs over the main entrance. It's a church or some sort of creepy religious building. I've done my research on Joanna, so I know she's been a longtime member

of the Blood of the Lamb Ministries—a cult with a supposed Prophet as the leader. But other than attending their services, I had no idea she'd gotten in so deep. This is another level.

Jacob parks right at the double doors, as if there's a spot reserved for him.

Two men walk out toward him, both of them armed with rifles slung over their shoulders. They knew he was coming. I pull in toward the back of the gravel parking lot and ease in between two cars. There are at least 20 vehicles in the lot, but there's not a soul out in the fields around here. They must all be inside.

I creep between the next row of cars, staying low as Joanna gets out and slams her door. "Finally, we can get this done."

"This the one with the fortune to her name?" one of the men asks.

"This is my bride, yes." Jacob opens the back door. When he grabs Charlie and pulls her from the car, I grit my teeth.

"Come on, your father's waiting. Let's close this deal." The other one gestures toward the doors.

"I'm eager to close it, too." He leans toward Charlie.

She yells and swings at him, which is when I realize her hands are bound. She still manages to make contact with his cheek, and his head whips back as he stumbles to the side.

"Don't fucking touch me, you creep!"

The two men laugh as Joanna hurries to her daughter and hisses something in her ear.

Jacob finally finds his feet and holds a hand to his face. "God has ordained this match! Nothing you do can stop it. Now stop being a little bitch and do what you're told!"

"You're the only little bitch I see around here!" Charlie shoots back.

Good girl. I smirk.

Jacob sputters as the other men start up another belly laugh.

Joanna grabs Charlie's elbow and drags her toward the doors. "You are going to behave or I'm going to allow them to handle Grams. Do you understand?"

My blood goes cold. These bastards are off the fucking rails.

Charlie digs her heels in. "What?"

"You heard me." Her mother whirls on her. "Her death would be for the good of the ministry and for your good, too. So don't give me a reason, young lady."

Charlie stops fighting and hangs her head. Her mother drags her the rest of the way into the building, and Jacob and the men follow.

Once the doors close, I hear nothing but the hum of a small airplane far overhead and the rumble of a tractor in the distance. I move quickly, darting between the cars until I reach the building, where I hurry along the wall and around to the side. There has to be another way into this place. I can't go through the front doors, not when I'm fairly certain there would be armed men waiting for me. But I'm not leaving here without Charlie.

I keep going, my head on a swivel as I come to the back corner and turn. Up ahead, there are several young women lounging by a pool. I keep going, straightening my posture and trying to pretend like I belong.

"Hey. You aren't supposed to be back here." A guard steps from a shadowy alcove against the back of the building.

"Sorry, I was sent out to the field to pray." I bow my head and hunch my shoulders. "But the sun got to me. I'm afraid I'm going to pass out."

The girls cover up, tossing towels over themselves. Once I get closer, I see one of them has a black eye.

"The Prophet's girls are sacred and not for your unwholesome eyes."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just—" I clutch my stomach with one hand. "I think I'm going to be sick."

“Don’t vomit on the travertine!” The guard sighs and gestures toward the building. “Get inside before he finds out. Hurry. Go straight to Deborah. She can check you out.”

“Thank you.” I clap my hand over my mouth and dart past him as he opens the rear door for me.

It slams shut, and I stay still for a moment as my eyes adjust to the dim interior. A long hallway leads deeper into the structure, doors on the left and right, some of them open. As I pass, I find sleeping quarters, most of them sparsely decorated, the beds made with hospital corners. I duck into one and look around, searching for a weapon.

Dropping to my knees, I feel under the bed. Nothing. Then I run my hand beneath the mattress. When I feel cold steel, I grin and pull out the gun. A revolver. Checking the cylinder, I find six shots. I tuck the piece in the back of my waistband and let my flannel shirt fall over it.

Then I return to the hallway and listen for the smallest sounds, knowing one of them will lead me to my Bunny.

CHARLIE

“Do we have a dress that will fit her?” A man that is the spitting image of Jacob, only older, asks. His eyes rake up and down my body. “She’s a bit plumper than our other females.” He licks his lips. From his expression, I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not. But based on the way he was staring at me earlier, I’d have to say he likes what he sees.

“Child-bearing hips.” Jacob grunts.

I really am going to throw up. My mind can’t let me think of having Jacob’s babies. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my mom’s mouth pursed shut. She was quick to hand me over to her lover, but it looks like she’s not so happy about the idea now. The second Jacob glances over at her, a fake smile lights up my mother’s face. I swear I don’t even recognize her anymore.

“I’ll have this one ready in no time, Prophet Micah.” A pretty blond girl comes into the room with a white garment over her arm. She’s younger than me. As with all the girls I’ve come across since I entered this place, she is thin and not in a natural way. Are they not feeding them because they don’t want plump females as Micah had said or because he wants them weak? I’m gonna go with the latter. It makes them easier to control.

The last thing I want to do is marry Jacob, but there are bigger things here at play than this stupid wedding. They’ve already threatened Grams. I have to keep her safe, no matter what.

“You’re always so helpful, Bella. My wives tell me your sewing is second to none. You will make a good wife soon.” Micah brushes a thumb across her cheek. I want to reach out and smack his hand away from her, but I keep them fisted at my side. At least they untied me. I’ve never found myself to be violent or confrontational, but an anger unlike anything I’ve experienced is bubbling up inside of me at the way these people prey on women. How they use their positions of power to manipulate them.

“Let’s leave them to get ready.” Micah and Jacob start to walk out, but suddenly Micah stops and grabs my chin. He’s a thin man but tall. “Are you sure Jacob is to be your choice?”

“Choice?” I had no idea there were choices.

“I could always take another bride.”

“Father.” Jacob stomps his foot, acting like a child.

“It might draw attention if she marries you.” My mother speaks. “That’s the last thing we need. Someone her own age will present better.”

“So be it.” Micah lets my chin go and walks away. Jacob follows after his father. The second the door closes behind them, I spin around to face my mother.

“What the hell are you doing?” I whisper. “You can’t be serious with this. Have they tricked you? Do they have something on you that they’re using against you?” I search for an explanation.

“There is no trickery and no blackmail. This is your destiny, Charlie. I must right my sins.”

“You mean you’re using me to pay for *your* sins.”

“Don’t forget it was your father who chose not to stick around.”

“Not sure I can blame him.”

My mother launches across the room. This time I know her intentions. I grab her hand before she can strike me. The rage in her eyes is clear. She doesn’t like that I’ve said the truth.

“He abandoned us.” The rage slips away, and for a second, I spot sadness, but it’s quickly covered. No, anger is so much easier for people to deal with.

“He did,” I agree. “Then you abandoned me.” I release her wrist. Because that’s exactly what happened. She may have been there physically, but she checked out on me emotionally.

“I did no such thing. I sent you to the best schools.”

“You got me out of your hair.” It’s not that I’m mad about it. I would have rather been there than with her. Even if I hated the schools. Those were my only two options. I couldn’t go with Grams. I was still my mother’s daughter. There was only so much Grams could do, and if sending me to some fancy school got me away from Joanna, then so be it.

“You’re ungrateful. This only proves to me that you need this life.”

“Dad left, so you let yourself get sucked into this church. I got left twice. First my father, then you couldn’t be happier to get me out of your way. I went to a school where I was awkward. I hated it. But how come in all of that I turned out to be a better human than you?”

“You’re a sinner,” she hisses.

“You’re the one having babies out of wedlock. Not to mention sleeping with Jacob.”

The pretty blonde lets out a small gasp.

“You hush.” My mom points her long, skinny finger at Bella. The girl casts her eyes down.

“Aren’t I the first wife? Don’t I get to boss her around?” I ask Bella, thinking she might know these rules.

“Well, yes if—”

“They aren’t married yet. Hold your tongue.” My mother cuts her off. “Get her ready. I’ll be back shortly.” My mom stomps from the room, slamming the door closed behind her.

“She’s a bitch,” I mutter. A giggle pops free from Bella. She covers her mouth with her hand to try and cover it. “How

many wives does Micah have?”

“Prophet Micah has ten.”

“He’s no prophet.”

Bella leans in close. “I might agree with you there, but saying such things can get you hurt,” she warns.

“You don’t want to be here?” I whisper.

“Where else is there to be?” She frowns, confused. That anger I was feeling earlier returns with a vengeance.

“A whole other world. This isn’t normal. It’s not right.” I correct the last part because this might be her normal. All she has ever known.

“I never thought it was, but we’re stuck.”

Her words break my heart even more than it already is. I have to figure something out. How can I save them, Grams and myself?

I pray for a miracle. That miracle being the man I love.

The building is vast on the inside, like an anthill with the way parts are segmented into what are essentially dorms, common areas, and eating halls. It seems as if the area I'm in is for the men, and I managed to pass by what must've been a class where at least a dozen men sat rapt as someone went over how to clean an assault rifle. Crosses over every door, a gun in every hand.

I keep going along the halls, walking as if I belong here. I pass a few men who nod at me, but none of them seem suspicious. The place is teeming with armed asshats, so I keep my demeanor as unthreatening as I can make it—not an easy task for a man of my size.

More hallways lead off to additional rooms, some of them lined with scripture, a machine shop, and others full to the brim with sacks of flour and jarred goods. I can't tell if these people are planning for the Rapture or another Ruby Ridge, but given their fondness for weapons, I'd have to guess the latter.

When I come to the end of what must be the men's section, I find a set of double doors with a digital punch-code lock. They keep either the money or the women behind these doors—likely both—for it to be protected like this.

The hall is still clear, and I backtrack to the machine shop. I beeline for the first toolbox I see and pull out some wire pliers and a few other tools, then head back to the door. There's no

security here other than the keypad. I suppose they feel perfectly safe here in their little hive. Not for long.

I drop to a knee and inspect the wires running into the keypad. After minimal rigging, I'm able to bypass the code entirely and trigger the door to open. I've cracked security systems at least a hundred times more difficult than this tinker toy bullshit. When the light turns green, I pull the double doors apart, use a screwdriver to keep it propped open, then rewire the doors to stay locked. I don't need any of the would-be Rambos interrupting me while I find Charlie.

Once I've rigged it again, I enter the double doors and let them shut behind me. When the light on the pad goes red again, I know it's set.

This area is different, not nearly as sparse as the rest of the building. Portraits hang along the walls, all of them with one older man surrounded by several women and children. I can guess what's going on here. If it were between consenting adults, that would be one thing. Here, it's not. The women by the pool—especially the one with the black eye—confirmed that for me. Not to mention creepy-ass Jacob. Motherfucker.

“Oh no, this dress is far too big for you. I forgot I'd altered it quite a bit bigger because Jen was very pregnant with Prophet Micah's child when she married him, though we aren't supposed to talk about that.”

“It doesn't matter if it doesn't fit. I'm not wearing it, because I'm *not* getting married!”

When I hear Charlie's voice, my heart seems to kick up to double time, and I hurry down the hallway, hoping she'll speak again so I know what door to open.

Female murmuring leads me deeper into the building.

“I'm getting us all out of here. This is ridiculous. Come on. Let's go.”

“We can't leave! Please, don't. They'll find you. The last girl who tried to run...” Her voice drops too low. I can't hear what she says, but Charlie's gasp tells me all I need to know.

“Why—why would they kill her?”

“As a lesson. Now come on and get dressed. I don’t want that to happen to you. Jacob—he gets angry, really angry. He’s been cruel to me before, and I don’t want him to touch you like that. It ... it hurts.”

My guts wrench at the suffering in the girl’s voice. I creep to the next door.

“We have to leave, Bella.”

“I told you—” She yelps when I open the door.

Charlie turns, her eyes lighting up, and she runs to me, throwing herself in my arms. “I knew you’d come. I just knew it!”

“Bunny.” I lift her up and kiss her, closing the door behind me with my foot as I hold her close. God, she feels so good in my arms, so perfect. I never want to let her go, not for one goddamn second. She’s mine. All fucking *mine*. The most priceless treasure I’ve ever set eyes on.

I kiss the life out of her, stealing her breath and giving it back, holding her so tightly I fear I might bruise her, but I can’t stop. Not until I feel her heartbeat and know she’s safe in my arms.

“Rowan.” She breathes out as I pull back and inspect her face.

“Have they hurt you?” I ask.

“No.” She lifts a hand to her cheek. “I think ... I think Jacob put a cloth to my face, and it made me sleep. When I woke up, I was in the car. Then here.”

“Oh no.” Bella, I presume, covers her mouth with her palm. “You’ve touched Jacob’s bride. You’ve *kissed* her. Oh no.”

“Bella.” Charlie wriggles, but I don’t let her go. “It’s all right. This is Rowan. My boyfriend.”

“Boyfriends aren’t allowed.” Bella’s eyes are huge with fear.

“We have to get out of here. We can sneak out the—”

“The wedding is about to start.” Bella shakes her head. “The families are already here in the sanctuary. You’d never make it past their men.”

“Fuck.” I keep my grip on Charlie. “Then I’ll just have to fight my way out. You stick close to me, and I’ll do what I have to do to get you to safety.” I pull the pistol from behind me, gripping it easily. Like a handshake from an old friend.

“No.” Charlie presses her palms to my chest. “There are women and children. The Prophets or whatever they are—they keep all those women and force them to bear their children. It’s not their fault. We can’t hurt them. If you get into some sort of shootout, you could risk them.”

I grate my teeth and look around the dressing room. There has to be something here I could use. My gaze settles on the huge, puffy dress in a pile on the floor. An idea—a bad one—forms in my mind.

“Does it have a veil?” I ask.

Bella blinks at me, her sunken eyes giving a tired owl look. “What?”

“The dress.” I yank it up. “Does it have a veil?”

“Of course. The Prophet isn’t allowed to set his eyes on his holy bride until they are sealed.”

“Rowan, what are you—”

I kiss Charlie hard again, needing her taste on my tongue, then pull away and start unbuttoning my shirt. “Get me dressed, ladies. I’m about to get married.”

CHARLIE

“*I* don’t think this will work.” Bella holds the dress up. Yeah, Rowan is not going to pass for a bride. It’s almost laughable that he thought he could. He is also never going to fit into that dress. “Are you, ah...” Bella’s eyes widen when Rowan gets half the buttons of his shirt undone.

“Stop taking your clothes off.” I smack at his hands. “We need another plan.”

“Kill them,” Bella whispers, surprising the hell out of me.

“Plan to,” Rowan says, like it’s a done deal. Bella nods in agreement, enjoying the idea herself.

She might fear them, but she also wants them dead. I’ve never wished death on someone before today. I can’t believe my mother willingly comes and goes from here. The others are trapped. Not her; she could have escaped at any time. Instead, she chose to drag me into this with her. I should hate her for that, but I won’t if we can free the women. At least then this all won’t be for nothing.

“If you take out Prophet Micah or Jacob, they won’t know what to do. Everyone blindly does what they say. If they aren’t here then...” Bella trails off. You have to cut the head off. Gross, but not grosser than what’s been happening here. A quick death for them is too kind, but if that’s what works and keeps the girls here safe, then so be it.

“Will everyone be at the wedding?” Rowan asks her. I can see the wheels spinning in his head. His expression is so intense it’s almost as if he’s another person. One that I don’t know.

“Yes, it’s the Prophet’s firstborn getting married.”

“He’s not getting fucking married,” Rowan grumbles.

“You’re going to have to surprise them. It’s the only way.” I take the dress from Bella’s hand. If everyone is distracted, Rowan can make a surprise attack. “Everyone’s attention will be at the front.”

“I’m not sending you out there to him.” I’m already wiggling out of my clothes to put the dress on.

“This dress is hideous.” Bella helps me get into it. “There is no other choice. We have to act now or you go for help.”

“I’m not going fucking anywhere without you. Charlie, I—”

“Make sure we don’t get to the kiss the bride part.” I cut him off. I know there is no way in hell Rowan will allow that to happen. That will put some fire under his ass. Though he might already have enough.

“The only thing he’ll be kissing is his life goodbye.” The tone of his voice is deadly serious. I button his shirt back up. God, I love this man. I can’t lose him. For the first time in my life, I know where I belong. It’s with him.

“You should go. I’m sure they’ll be coming for me at any moment.” I fight back tears, not wanting him to leave but knowing there is no other option. I can do this. I’ve spent so much of my life on my own. Oddly, that might be my mother’s undoing.

“I’ll burn this whole place to the ground if something happens to you.”

“I think you should burn it either way.” Rowan claims my mouth in a hard, deep kiss. “I’ll see you at the altar,” he vows before he reluctantly slips away.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Bella whispers as she helps me finish getting ready for this stupid wedding. The dress has to be pulled in. “Prophet Micah was right.” I stiffen, scared Bella might be having second thoughts. “Today is going to be a big day for us all.” A smile plays at Bella’s lips. “Take this.” She presses a small pair of metal scissors in my hand.

“Thank you.” I force a smile onto my face for her.

“Hopefully, all of us will be thanking you,” she responds right before the door swings open. My mother appears.

What the hell am I going to do with her when we get to the other side of this? Is she evil or merely brainwashed? Either way, she’s never been a great mother.

“I see you’re coming around.” Excitement lights up her face as she tries to play with my hair. I step back from her. This isn’t some happy mother-daughter moment. I can’t fake that. I’ve always been a terrible liar. “Charlie, don’t ruin this. It’s your wedding day. A mother and daughter should be celebrating together.”

“They shouldn’t be marrying the same man.” That knocks the smile right off her face. The coldness returns. Both are eerily creepy.

“Put the veil on her. Let’s get this done.” My mom can really flip her personality in a split second. I expect to feel sadness as I stare into her angry, jealous eyes. So many things are starting to piece together in my mind. Everything about her is calculated. Doing whatever she has to for her own needs or wants.

My father only stayed as long as he could because of me. I’m guessing him taking off on her wasn’t in her plans. I wouldn’t be shocked if she got pregnant on purpose with me. Then once he up and left, I was useless and in the way. It was easier to ship me off to boarding school until she found use for me again. I don’t think something turned my mother crazy. She’s just *always* been that way.

The silver lining is while my mother and her weirdo friends might have come up with some crazy plan to steal my grandmother’s money, they have unknowingly plotted what will be their demise.

I don’t think it’s whatever craziness they believe in that has predicted what is to come here today but fate. Maybe it was a bit of magic from above that I don’t understand. Whatever it is, I want to believe it is good. And that it brought Rowan and

me here to this moment to save these children and women
from these men.

It's their day of reckoning.

I keep my head up as I stride down the hallway, joining a small stream of people heading to what can only be the wedding. We enter a church, the simple pews mostly full. Along the wall are various paintings of the Prophet as Jesus or a shepherd. Makes me fucking sick.

Though the pews are full, I move along the side aisle toward the front. A little girl scoots over for me, and I sit at the end of the aisle behind a pew full of women in white. They must be the wives of the Prophet, if I were to guess.

“Where’s your wife?” the little girl asks, and I notice she has a bruise on her jaw.

“She’s not here yet.” I give her a smile. “But don’t worry. She’ll be here soon. What happened?” I point at her cheek.

“Oh, Daddy said I didn’t do the dishes right.”

“He hit you?”

She shrugs and goes back to playing with her doll. It looks kind of like her, the hair made of yellow yarn. A totally normal scene except that next to her are about six more children and four women that I can only assume are wives to one of the men here. Some of them are sporting more bruises like hers. My blood was already boiling, but now it’s hotter than the fucking sun.

A door at the front opens, daylight beaming inside, then the Prophet and Jacob stride in. The little shit has a self-satisfied grin as he stares around at everyone assembled for his

wedding. He looks right past me, his gaze finally setting on the doors at the back as he takes his place.

“We’re here to wed my son to his first promised wife.” Standing in the center, the Prophet opens his arms wide. “To begin his heavenly collection of souls. She will serve him, love him, produce children for him, and obey him in all things.” His gaze falls to the women seated in front of me, his eyes narrowing. “For we all know the price that must be paid if any female seeks to put herself over a male, seeks to disobey, or seeks to be heard when she should only be seen.”

“Amen,” the men in the crowd grunt.

The Prophet picks up a Bible, then gestures toward the pianist.

She starts up some old-timey hymn as the congregation stands.

The doors at the back open, and Charlie walks in, her mother holding her elbow. They take slow steps, and Jacob grins big, his bird chest puffing out.

I hate every second of it, every single moment when that prick Jacob thinks he has even the slightest chance of taking my Charlie against her will.

When she makes it to him, he reaches for her. She doesn’t reach back.

I should wait, should give the scene more time so that no one notices when I step from the pew and start shit. But I don’t. The thought of him even touching my Charlie makes pure rage pump through my heart, and I have to move. Now.

Pulling my gun, I take a few steps to get me past the rows of women, then I aim for the Prophet.

Someone yells. I ignore them and pull the trigger. He falls to his knees as I advance, my gun still up as Jacob throws up his hands to protect himself.

I’m tackled from the side, the impact knocking the wind out of me as the entire church erupts in screams. The man tries to roll me beneath him, but I use his momentum against him and come out on top. I bring the butt of the gun down on his face, breaking his nose as he screams.

I shove off him in time to see Jacob running out of the sanctuary and dragging Charlie with him. “Stop!” I hurdle the Prophet’s body, wishing I could kick him one good time, but not having a moment to spare.

Gunfire rings out behind me, wood splintering as I dash through the doors. Once there, I turn and grab a wrought iron chair, then ram the legs through the handles.

“Let her go!” I turn back to Jacob and run straight for him and Charlie.

“Get back!” he screams and pulls a knife, holding it to Charlie’s throat as he hangs on to her waist.

“Jacob!” Joanna stands a few paces away. “Don’t!”

Charlie struggles.

“I’ll cut you, bitch!” he screams.

“Charlie, it’s okay,” I call. “It’s okay.”

Her teary eyes meet mine.

“Just go easy.” I glance to the blade at her neck.

“Jacob, let her go. You can’t—”

“Shut up!” he yells at her, then drags Charlie a few more steps back. “I never should’ve listened to you. A fucking woman! You don’t know shit.”

“You little shit! I’m the one who brought you this whole plan. The money, the wives, the—”

“Shut your stupid mouth!” he bellows.

I’ve been creeping closer the whole time.

“Put the gun down!” He points the knife at me, then returns it to Charlie’s throat.

“All right. Just don’t hurt her.” I hold the gun up in my palm and slowly lower myself to my knees.

“Jacob, I’m begging you. Stop this. We can fix—”

“My father is dead because of you!”

“That makes you Prophet now. Don’t you see? This is a stroke of luck. As your wife, I–”

“I was never going to marry you!” He laughs, high and ugly. “You think I want a barren old hag when I can have my pick of all the virgins here? I could have as much teen pussy as I want. You were *never* going to be my wife.”

Joanna lets out an inhuman scream and rushes him, her claws out. I pop up as soon as she starts moving. Jacob yells and backs away, momentarily forgetting about Charlie.

I fire right as Joanna reaches him. They fall in a pile as I run to Charlie and scoop her into my arms, backing away as Joanna falls to the side, Jacob’s blade in her chest. He’s dead from my bullet, his face in the dirt.

“Mom!” Charlie screams.

Men shout, and they’re hitting the church door harder now. It won’t be long until they break free.

“Hold on to me.” I sprint around the building, heading straight to the parking lot.

Charlie cries, but her grip stays tight as I carry her away from this horrible fucking place.

As we get to the cars, two men pop out of the glass door, assault rifles drawn. They start firing, and I duck behind an SUV.

“We’re trapped.” Charlie snuffles.

A siren begins to wail, the sound weaving into the gunfire that suddenly drops.

Charlie looks at me, her watery eyes wide.

“I called the feds.” I kiss her, then rise and carry her to my car, gently putting her in the back, then getting behind the wheel. “The men will scatter like rats, but they’ll leave the women and children.”

Four FBI vans race past and pull up to the glass doors. Men begin unloading, all of them in riot gear. Once I’m certain no one else is coming, I floor it in reverse, then tear from the

parking lot, my Charlie safe with me, and the entire corrupt shithole crawling with feds.



It's late into the night as Edith listens raptly while Charlie and I tell her what happened. She even stops knitting, Dudley sitting in her lap as he regards us.

When we're done, Edith takes Charlie's hands in hers. "I'm sorry. I never liked Joanna. I can't deny that, but I'm sorry she got caught up in this mess, and I'm sorry it led to her death like that."

Charlie nods, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Me too. It's going to take time for me to ..."

"It's all right." I hug her to me. "We'll be here for you the whole way."

She snuggles against my neck. "I know. Thank you."

Edith gives me a sharp look. "Thank you for saving my granddaughter. You were a good choice for a handyman. I figured you knew your way around a gun."

I raise a brow. "What?"

Edith laughs. "You think I don't know you?"

Her gaze is positively calculated, and I feel as if I'm seeing her—the *real* her—for the very first time. It makes me speechless.

"What do you mean, Grams?" Charlie asks.

Edith laughs even louder. "Rowan here—though he makes a halfway decent handyman—is nothing of the sort."

Charlie looks up at me. "What?"

I didn't expect to have to come clean so soon. Charlie's already been through a lot, but Edith has forced my hand. "She's right." I take her hands in mine. "That was a front."

“Not a front anymore. You’ve stuck around for far too long. I think you secretly love being my handyman.” Edith picks up her knitting needles and starts click-clacking them on Dudley’s tail. He seems used to it, though, because he just sighs and rests his chin on his paws.

“I’m confused.”

“He’s a treasure hunter. Looking for your father’s lost diadem.”

“You know about the diadem, too?” I gawk at Edith.

“Of course I knew.” She peers at Dudley’s tail. “This new yarn sure is finicky.” She continues, “Why did you think I gave you all the hints about the ghost in my wall? Silly man. I figure the main jewel from the diadem would make a nice engagement ring for my Charlie.”

Charlie covers her face with her hands. “I can’t ... This is ... What is happening right now?”

“Charlie?” I gently pull her hands away and hold them in mine. “It’s all true. But everything changed when I met you. I tried to keep going, to keep plotting to take the diadem and run, but I couldn’t. Not when you were here. Not when you were all I could think about. The diadem doesn’t matter to me. You do. I swear it, Charlie. You’re the only thing I care about. I don’t care if you take that diadem and pawn it.”

Edith snorts. “I already told you what to do with it, young feller. Now it’s getting close to midnight. Get on up there, the both of you.” She points a needle at the ceiling.

“This is too much.” Charlie shakes her head.

“Wait till you see the diamond, then get back to me.” Grams chuckles. “Go on, now. The both of you.”

Charlie stands, her eyes dazed, and I lead her up to Grams’ room.

The ticking has already started. I can hear it clearly.

“What is that?” Charlie sits on the bed, her gaze on the wall.

I drag a chair over and climb into it, then feel around on the wall above the closet. “If I’m right, it’s a time-activated safe. I suspect the mechanism is supposed to be totally silent, but with age and the constant settling of this house, it’s gotten noisy.” The ticking speeds up. I keep feeling around on the wall, then stop when my fingers pass over a small round indent.

I push on it, and the wall clicks, a square panel falling back and moving to the side, revealing a small compartment with a dial on the front.

“I feel like this is one big hallucination.” Charlie rubs her eyes.

I check my watch. “Ten seconds.” Jumping down, I take Charlie’s hands and pull her with me, then help her up into the chair. “Watch.”

The time ticks down to nothing, then the dial rotates and clicks to a stop. “Open it.” I put my arm around her waist. “What’s inside is yours anyway.”

She lifts a trembling hand and grabs on to the dial, then pulls. The door gives, and inside is wealth beyond imagining, but I can only look at the priceless woman in my arms and watch as her eyes light up. She’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen and worth far more than any treasure, no matter the cost.

EPILOGUE

CHARLIE

“*W*here have you two been off to this time?” Grams clicks her knitting needles as Dudley chases her ball of yarn.

“A short trip to Switzerland.” I hand Grams a little curio piece of a mountain village.

“Oh, this’ll look nice with the others.” She points to the mantle in the sitting room where several kitschy cute souvenirs sit. “I went to Switzerland back in the seventies. Ruined a few men there for life.” She laughs.

“I don’t doubt it. You Devereaux woman are a force to be reckoned with.” Rowan stands behind me as I place the Swiss village just so.

“Any additional plans?” Grams asks.

“Yes.” I look over my shoulder at Rowan.

He grins and kisses my forehead. “Go ahead, Bunny. I know you’re dying to tell her.”

I squeal and hurry over to Grams, sitting across from her on the squeaky sofa.

“How many honeymoons have you two had? About a dozen.” Grams nods and continues knitting. “Keep it up.”

After the whole incident with the cult, I took a while to accept it all—and to accept that my mother was truly gone. It was a gut punch, really, especially when I look back over the years and notice how she was grooming me all along. Keeping me

sheltered. Keeping me ‘pure’ as she believed. I don’t know when I lost her to the cult, but sometimes I think I never had her, never had a real mother at all. That’s why I’m so thankful for Grams and Rowan. Once the shock wore off about who Rowan really was, I realized his past didn’t matter any more than mine did. We’d found each other. No matter how unlikely and strange, we met our match.

“Something on your tongue, pretty girl?” Grams asks, a twinkle in her eye.

Rowan stands behind me, his comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Yes, actually.” I tangle my fingers together. “I’m—”

“Look!” Grams holds up her knitting. It’s a knit hat in rainbow colors. One far too small for me. Actually, it’s the perfect size for ... a baby. “You know?” I gasp.

“I know lots.” She shimmies her shoulders. “And you two do the dirty enough to have already been pregnant five times over.” She cackles. “The ducts in this old place carry sound pretty darn good.”

Rowan groans. “Too much information, Edith.”

Tears prick behind my eyes as Grams takes my hand and squeezes it, her fingers warming the diamond bands on my ring finger. “You’re going to be an amazing mother. You’ve got the kindest heart and the gentlest touch—so much so that sometimes I wonder how we’re related.” She winks.

“Don’t sell yourself short.” I squeeze her hand. “I couldn’t wish for a better Grams.” I swear her eyes water a little before she leans back and gives Dudley a pat. “We’re going to have a little one scampering around here soon, Dudders. Someone to play with you and pull your tail. I can’t wait.”

“Come on. Let’s get to bed. It was a long ride home.” Rowan comes around and helps me up.

I roll my eyes. “You act like I’m nine months already.”

“Let the boy dote on you.” Grams waves a needle at me, then starts humming WAP and continues knitting.

“She took it well,” Rowan says as he helps me up the stairs and to our room. “I knew she would. Can you imagine how much trouble she and our child are going to get up to? We’ll have to notify the authorities so they can keep a lookout.”

I laugh and cup my growing tummy. I don’t show much, but it’s enough. It feels ... hopeful. As if that’s exactly what’s growing inside me and getting bigger by the day. Hope.

“I’ve got it!”

“What?” He closes the door behind us.

“A name. If it’s a girl, I want to name her Hope.”

“Sounds good to me.” He comes to me and backs me to the bed. “Now lie back. You’re tired, and I’m starving.”

My eyes widen. “But Grams just said she can hear us through the—Mmph!”

He’s put his hand over my mouth as he lowers me all the way to the mattress. “Then you should be quiet, because I’m going to enjoy this with or without an audience.” He drops to his knees and pulls my panties off. With no warning, he gives me a long lick, sending sensation ricocheting all along my skin. “Rowan!”

“You’re getting loud, Bunny.” He laughs against my sex, the tingling almost unbearable, then he licks again.

I’m already pregnant-horny, and his touches are almost too much to bear.

“I know what you like.” He slides two fingers inside me, and I give up on trying to be quiet. While he focuses on my clit, he uses his fingers to stroke me just right. In only a matter of a minute, my lower back arches off the bed as I come, his name on my lips as he draws the pleasure from me with practiced ease.

When I can finally breathe again, he kisses up my body and nibbles my bottom lip. “Now get some rest. I’ll be hungry again in no time.”

“You’re a bad man.” I kiss him.

“I’m *your* bad man.” He adjusts me in the bed and drapes me with a quilt Grams made. “And I’ll always be here.”

I look up at him, love in his eyes as he stares back.

I thought I came to Grams’ house to find myself. Instead, I found the one man who understands me better than I do. A thief who came here to find jewels but instead made off with my heart. Not a problem for me, though, because I never want it back. It’s safe in his hands. Forever.



4 Brides, 4 Love Stories, and 4 HEAs!

(not to mention the kitty)



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She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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